

Letters of Recommendation



What this handout is about

Recommendation letters are an integral part of any application. This handout is for students seeking a recommendation letter and for instructors (and others) who write such letters.

Tips for requesting a recommendation

Recommenders can comment on your relevant academic skills or leadership traits, your suitability for a program or job, and your potential for success. Potential employers and graduate programs value your recommenders' evaluation and opinions. When deciding whom to ask, consider the following before making any selections:

- Choose instructors you know from class or in other capacities, such as an advisor or student organization sponsor. Sometimes students ask professors they've known for a total of two weeks for a recommendation letter. Do your best to avoid this approach, as it may do more harm than good.
- Choose a recommender who has appropriate expertise in your chosen field of study or area of prospective employment. Such a person can make a credible assessment of your knowledge, experience, and skills.
- For graduate school applications, try to choose someone with a reputation in your field, such as an associate or full professor. However, you should balance this criterion with how well the recommender knows you. Don't base your decision on reputation alone.
- For other kinds of applications, ask yourself: if I was on the committee making decisions about applicants, who would I want to hear from? Whose opinions would I respect or trust?
- Make sure your recommender feels comfortable writing you a favorable letter. Don't be afraid to ask, "Do you feel comfortable writing a positive letter for me? Do you think you can comment favorably about my experience and knowledge?"
- Consider asking if a potential recommender is also willing to give you feedback on other parts of your application, such as a writing sample or statement of purpose. The more expert eyes that see your application materials, the better. Keep in mind, though, that your recommender may be very busy and that you are already asking for a favor; you might say something like "If you happen to have time, I would love to get your feedback on my application materials, but of course I know you are very busy."

Once you've chosen your recommenders, make sure to:

- Give plenty of notice well in advance of the application deadline.

- Provide the recommender with a CV or resume, your statement of interest for a graduate program or job, and a program or job description. The recommender can then tailor your letter appropriately.
- If necessary, provide other materials such as recommendation forms or stamped and addressed envelopes (some institutions want recommenders to mail your letter directly to them). Remember that some forms require your signature or personal information, like your address and phone number; your recommender cannot be expected to provide this information, so fill out those parts of the form in advance.
- Be prepared to remind the recommender about approaching deadlines.
- As a courtesy, notify the recommender when a decision has been made about your application.

Tips for writing a recommendation

Before you agree to write a recommendation, consider the following.

- Talk with the student about her or his academic background and professional goals to see if you feel comfortable supporting the application.
- Are you willing to do more than just write a letter? Students may need help with other parts of the job or school application, such as the statement of purpose or writing sample. Since you understand what graduate programs or employers are looking for, you are in a unique position to help students with these other materials.
- There are several reasons why it might be appropriate to say no to a request for a recommendation.
 - You don't feel comfortable writing a positive letter of recommendation.
 - You are a 'bad fit' for the student's application. For example, if your field of expertise is completely unrelated to the student's area of interest, advise the student to ask professors with the relevant credentials.
 - You know that you will not have time to write and proofread a strong letter before the student's deadline.

If you agree to write a letter, follow through on the next steps.

- Ask the student for a resume, CV, activity list, statement of purpose or program/job description before you begin. These documents can give you a sense of the applicant's goals and allow you to tailor your letter appropriately.
- Ask the student to provide you with any necessary forms and stamped/addressed envelopes.
- Be aware of deadlines.

Some institutions will ask you to answer specific questions about the applicant in your letter. If they leave the content of the letter open-ended, make sure to include the following.

- Describe your qualifications to be an evaluator/recommender of the student.
- Discuss how well and in what capacity you know the applicant.

- Name and give examples of 2 or 3 qualities of the applicant. Relate these to the applicant's proposed field of study or area of employment.
- If possible, invite the institution or employer to make additional contact with you about the applicant.

Letters of recommendation play an important part in the decisions of admissions committees, employers, funding agencies, and other organizations who are trying to choose between multiple candidates; your efforts in seeking strong letters (if you are the applicant) or creating them (if you are the recommender) do make a difference.



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The Writing Center • Campus Box #5137 • SASB North Suite 0127 • UNC-CH • Chapel Hill, NC 27599 • CSSAC Home • <http://cssac.unc.edu/>

phone: (919) 962-7710 • **email:** writing_center@unc.edu

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