

PPA HOW TO GUIDE

A BIG Favor: Requesting Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are not only required for professional or grad school applications. Very often, scholarships, research opportunities or internships require the recommendation(s) of a professor, advisor or professional within a given field as part of the application package.

Letters of recommendation are not simple tasks for letter writers, and it's very important for students who are requesting one to understand the difficulty of what they are asking.

If an instructor, for example, uses a "form" letter that essentially lists how well a student did in a given class (e.g., 9th in a class of 200) with a few statements about general demeanor as a student, that instructor will still have to spend time looking up old class rosters/grades, and proofreading the form letter to make sure that they have the right student information on the letter and that the pronouns match. Even something this basic can take an hour or more.

But most writers do not use form letters. Most writers, being either professors or field professionals, know very well how critical letters of recommendation are to an application package. They understand that there is such a thing as a 'weak' letter, and most don't want to write one. It helps letter writers a great deal if you can provide them what they need to write a good one.

How do you make it easier for them to write that strong letter?

FIRST: Make an **appointment** to meet directly with the person you are asking to write the letter. Unless the person is on sabbatical or out of state, we do not recommend having your initial conversation via email, although you may correspond via email in following up the first meeting. You're asking for a big favor; talk face to face.

- The appointment needs to be a MINIMUM of one full month before the deadline, if it's for a scholarship or an internship of some kind. Six weeks is preferable.
- If the letters are for a professional school application process, you should approach your letter writer for an appointment at least 2 months before they need to submit--e.g, ask by March 31 for a letter that must be submitted by June 1. Keep in mind that some professors may get more than a hundred requests for a letter of recommendation. Make sure you give these letter writers plenty of notice!
- If possible, get their business card! Filling out information about letter writers on forms is much simpler if you have a business card for reference.

SECOND: Prepare to **provide** the following to your recommender at the appointment:

- A copy of your transcript(s). This doesn't need to be official, but you should have something. Letter writers will need to have an idea of what your entire academic record is to write a strong letter.
- A resume or CV that lists your work and volunteer experience; any awards you may have received; any certifications you have earned; and any publications you can list. Letter writers need to know about your overall experience.
- Information about the scholarship/internship/research opportunity or application service that the letter is being written for (e.g., a Dean's scholarship, a paid internship, graduate/medical school admission.) The more information you can provide your letter writers about the audience, the more specific they can be.

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- A personal statement from you, explaining why you are interested in a particular scholarship, etc. If this is for a professional school application cycle, the best option might be a copy of the personal statement you are providing as part of your primary application. (Draft versions should be marked as such.)
 - A **preemptive deadline**. Tell your letter writers when you want the letters to be submitted. Do **NOT** give them the last day that the letter can be submitted! There should be a minimum of 3 weeks between the very final deadline, and the deadline you give your letter writer. You have to leave plenty of time for the letter to be mailed, delivered, and processed before the final deadline. For example, if a scholarship application must be complete by Oct 31, you should give your letter writer a deadline of Oct 8. That will leave time for your letter to be go through campus mail, the USPS, be received and be processed before Oct 31.
 - Submission/identification information for your letter. This may be as simple as providing your student number, or it may be an official “applicant ID” or even an “applicant ID plus letter ID.” Most letter submissions are done online now. You need to be sure that you provide the correct information to your letter writers about how to identify you/your letters to the specific system in question, *especially* if part of the submission includes the system sending out a randomized secured link, which may not be identified in any other way. You **DO NOT** want your letter writers to delete it, thinking that it’s some kind of virus. Be sure in your meeting to discuss how the letter will be submitted, if you have a form or other information, provide it.

THIRD: Attend your meeting—**on time!**—and be prepared to discuss:

- Why you think that **they, specifically**, are the best person to provide this particular letter for you. The reason will be different for every letter writer, and every circumstance. A generic answer will result in a generic letter; and as a rule, generic letters are not very strong.
- Your overall goals and your progress in achieving them, referencing your CV and transcript.
- Challenges you face(d), have overcome, and how you dealt with them.
- Double check that they have everything they need to forward the letter to its’ proper destination.
- If this is for a professional school application, you might want to talk about how the letter writer will archive (or **if** they will archive) your letter, just in case you have to ask them to resubmit it for the next application cycle. Professional schools are expecting letters of recommendation that are dated the year of application. “Old” letters are not in your favor; the PPA office only keeps letters for the current cycle if you are using our letter service.

FOURTH: Follow up!!!

- No later than 1 week after your meeting, send a ‘thank you’ email or card to your letter writer, expressing your appreciation for the favor they are doing. Make sure to include **ACCURATE** contact information with this letter—phone, email, etc., especially if this is over the summer and you will not be in town—and say that if the letter writer needs more information or wants to meet again before completing your letter, that you are at their disposal.
- If a letter writer does ask for more information, provide it in person within 2 business days; or if it will be longer than 2 days, let them know when they will receive it from you.
- Starting about 3 weeks before the deadline, start checking regularly (perhaps weekly) to see if the letter has arrived at its destination. This may mean logging into an online system such as AMCAS, or it may mean making a phone call to the office where the letter is supposed to be sent.
- If the letter has not arrived at its destination by 1 week before the preemptive deadline you gave your letter writer, it’s best to check to see if the letter writer has all the information that he/she needs to mail or upload your letter. It’s possible that someone could lose an AMCAS form, or a stamped envelope, etc., and need a replacement. Be prepared to send them whatever they need.
- **Finally**, have an alternate in mind. Sometimes, circumstances make it impossible for a letter writer to complete the job—e.g., a serious medical issue. If you’re following up, and something like this happens, you should have time to get an alternate letter for your application.