

How to Ask for a Letter of Recommendation

First, some essential background: College professors are expected to write letters of recommendation. It's part of their job, and the better they are at it, the better their students do and therefore the better it is for the university – and for them. Only ask professors who are good communicators, if you can!

The second half of this, though, is letting your professors get to know you. It can be hard to stand out in a large class, but professors are required to offer students two office hours a week. Go and see them! Even if they seem very busy, they do want you to!

Having said that it is part of their job to write letters for their students, it is a great favor if you need a letter on short notice – and all professors who are professionally active have had to ask for these due-right-away letters as well as write them, so they will understand, but here you are truly asking for a favor. Ask specifically if they can complete the letters before the deadline.

Here are some guidelines for asking for a letter:

- Be polite.
- First ask, preferably in person, if the person is able to write a positive letter for you.
- In an e-mail, provide all the details the professor needs. These include
 - The dates and classes you took with that person (“I was a student in your Processes of Writing class [section 2002] during fall of 2011. . .”). This is important because the recommender will have to look you up (and you will want them to look you up; this is time-consuming for the recommender, if they teach a lot of classes. Most FIU profs do. Telling them where to look will save them time and trouble.
 - A list of all recommendation recipients, grouped according to due dates. Spell out due dates in a way that's easy to find in the document. Include
 - The complete name and address of each institution (make sure you supply this information in electronic form, perhaps in addition to print form, so that the recommender can cut and paste it onto letters or envelopes, if appropriate)
 - The program you are applying to (Many professors tailor specific letters to the specific program, so you save them an e-mail, asking you about your program.)
 - Stamped, addressed envelopes for all institutions that require paper letters
 - Online applications will be sent to recommender e-mails, but list these according to due dates.
 - Any forms required to be mailed. Be sure to have these filled out completely with your information and as much information about the recommender as you can. Don't make the recommender fill out your name on forms, ever!
 - If there are paper forms, gather them all together and give them to the recommender in a large envelope with your name on it
 - Your resume or CV
 - Copies of papers you wrote for the professor. This helps recommenders be specific in their recommendations. Online copies are good for this.
 - Describe the program(s) you are applying for; this will help the professor make your letter more targeted.

Other things to consider:

- Very important: only use an e-mail address that identifies your name. If a professor needs to return to the e-mail and the email address is not your name, he/she might not be able to find it.
- Follow up. Give the professor time to write the letter, and then send a thank you note. This note serves two purposes: it thanks, and it reminds.
- Keep track of those places that have not received letters. Remind again that deadlines are approaching. You are not being a pest; sometimes even the most conscientious, well-meaning professor will forget.
- It's impossible to over-thank.
- Let the recommender know if you are successful in your applications. It's very satisfying to hear! If you don't succeed, let them know that, too. They may have good ideas that can help you succeed.

* Never ask a professor to hand you a letter. If you need to gather letters together and send them in a single packet, ask the professor for a signed letter in a sealed envelope, signed again across the envelope back. Institutions will not accept letters not sealed in this way.