

Letters of Recommendation

What are letters of recommendation?

Letters of recommendation are an important component to your application for a job or graduate school program. The letter of recommendation will provide information that may not be found elsewhere in an application, such as description of character, professional behavior, and maturity. Typically two to four reference letters will be required from people who know you well and can speak to your interests, abilities, education, and experience. It is vitally important to begin cultivating meaningful relationships with potential recommenders early on in your college career.

The employer may request an actual letter, ask for a list of recommenders, or ask for a list with the letters to follow. If a list is requested, use your résumé heading to create a separate document to list the names of the recommenders with their title, place of employment, address, telephone number, and e-mail address.

How to ask for letters of recommendation:

1. **Identify references who know you well** and will be able to discuss in specific detail what distinguishes you. An employer may want a blend of work and academic references, whereas a graduate school may be looking for academic references to verify your ability to manage the rigors of graduate education. Read the application directions carefully to make sure you are obtaining the correct references for the position or graduate program to which you are applying.
2. **Ask well in advance of the deadline.** Five to six weeks may be adequate, but it is best to consult with the recommender to see how much lead-time is needed. In many cases, you may start communicating with your recommenders six months to one year prior to beginning your search.
3. **Ask in person.** “Do you feel you know me (or my academic record, my leadership qualities) well enough to write a letter of recommendation for my job (or graduate school) applications?” You have now given the professor/administrator the opportunity to decline gracefully. If the answer is “no,” don’t push.
4. **Remember to ask permission.** Never list a person as a recommender without first checking with them. Even if you have used recommenders in a previous job search, you must re-connect with them before placing them on the list.
5. **Schedule an appointment with your recommenders** to discuss your job and/or graduate school search, its selection criteria, your most recent and commendable activities, and to suggest what each recommender might emphasize. You may want to let your recommenders know who your other recommenders are, so that they can write letters that complement, rather than repeat, one another.
6. **Bring to this meeting:**
 - A current résumé/curriculum vitae (CV). Be sure to include your contact information, internships or work/research experience, community service, conference papers/presentations, leadership activities, and other creative experiences.
 - A copy of your personal statement, course of study proposal, or a one- to two-page statement describing your professional goals.
 - Any pertinent reminders about the work you have done for this professor/administrator that will help you highlight what makes you a strong candidate; past papers or exams are especially helpful.

- A copy of your transcript. This can be an unofficial copy and is to give your recommender an overview of your academic program to-date as well as your grades. If your grades are not what you think they should be, be prepared to identify any extenuating circumstances (e.g. health or family issues, other responsibilities, number of courses taken in that semester, or level of course taken).
 - The official description of the criteria the recommender's letter should address and the deadline by which the letter is due. Supplement this description with your own suggestions as to what you would like your recommender to emphasize.
 - Any coversheets or official recommendation forms that should accompany the letter. Be sure to complete any section that pertains to you: name, address to which the letter should be sent, etc. Each application is different. Make sure you have waived your right to access under the Family Rights and Privacy Act. Selection committees often fail to take non-restricted letters seriously.
 - And if appropriate, a stamp for the recommender to mail the recommendation letter in their letterhead envelope.
7. **Follow up with recommenders in advance of deadlines** to check on their progress in completing your letter of recommendation. It is your responsibility to make sure your letters have been received by the employer or graduate program on time. Regular communication and detailed follow up is vital to ensure your success.
 8. **Keep in touch with your recommenders** through your application process. Update them on the positions or graduate programs to which you have applied and interviewed. In general it is a good practice and common courtesy to share the descriptions of the positions for which you are applying with your recommenders, especially if you are a top candidate in a search.
 9. **Share your success with your recommenders** by making a personal phone call and/or sending them a thank you note to express your appreciation for their time and effort.

Career Services Resources

Credentials Files – A service provided to students and alumni for up to ten years post-graduation. Specific guidelines and Reference Forms are available at the Center for Career Services reception desk. Once letters of recommendation are on file, a written request must be submitted in order for recommendation letters to be sent to a potential employer or graduate program.

Center for Career Services
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 315-228-7380
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