
How to ask for a letter of recommendation?

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HOW TO ASK FOR A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION?

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We all know the problem – you need a letter of recommendation – but you do not know whom to ask and how to ask. In many contexts, letters of recommendation are required, such as applications for scholarships, fellowships, grants, new positions, awards and honors, and professional development programs. In this article, you will find the open secrets of asking the right person to write you a great letter of recommendation – even if you do not know the person yet.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO ASK FOR A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION?

Asking for a recommendation letter can be very annoying – particularly **when you have no idea whom to ask and how to**

approach this person. To reduce stress, it helps a lot to approach this task strategically. Below, I will address the following questions about how to ask for letter of recommendation:

1. How to find a recommender?
2. How do you select the best recommender?
3. When is the best time to ask for a letter of recommendation?
4. What information do you need to provide?
5. How do you make it easier for your recommender to write your letter?
6. How do you follow up politely?
7. What do you do if there is no answer?
8. How to express gratitude?

WHO SHOULD YOU ASK FOR LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION?

The Importance of a Strong Recommendation



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While a strong recommendation can boost your application, a weak or negative recommendation can have the opposite effect. Unsurprisingly, it may even lead to your application being rejected. Therefore, it is vital to carefully choose your recommenders and provide them with the information they need to write a positive and supportive letter.

Identifying the Right Person to Write Your Recommendation

Begin by carefully selecting the right recommender. Guidelines and supervisors will always suggest choosing someone familiar with your work who can provide a detailed letter highlighting your strengths and achievements.

Choose recommenders who are a good fit for the type of application you are submitting. Faculty members who can discuss your academic research and potential for advanced study are ideal for graduate school applications or applications for PhD, postdoctoral, or [tenure-track positions](#). Former employers or supervisors who can speak to your professional skills and achievements will be more relevant for industry positions.

Selecting the appropriate person to write a recommendation is pivotal. Choosing individuals who have a positive relationship with you and are familiar with your work ethic and career goals is a good idea. This could include former professors, supervisors, or colleagues.

The best choices are typically professors, supervisors, or mentors who have directly overseen your work and can provide specific examples of your skills and achievements.



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If you know a friendly person who can help you, that would be great! If not, what should you do? See below!

Factors to Consider in Choosing a Recommender

Consider the type of role you are applying for and select recommenders who can speak to your relevant skills and experiences. A former professor or research advisor might be ideal for academic positions, while a previous employer or industry-associated supervisor could provide a more suitable perspective for industry roles.

The Importance of Selecting Someone Who Knows You Well



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A strong recommendation comes from someone who knows you well and can provide a detailed account of your strengths, achievements, and potential. Choose individuals who have worked closely with you and can provide a detailed letter highlighting your capabilities.

You can approach individuals less familiar with you and your accomplishments; however, let me emphasize that the best

letters come from those with a close professional relationship with you.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU HAVE NO RECOMMENDER WHO KNOWS YOU

Finding a **recommender** who knows you well can be challenging, especially if you are early in your career or have recently changed fields. In big universities, professors might not know you, even though you might have participated well in lectures, classes, or seminars.



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In such situations, it is crucial to be proactive and strategic. Start by identifying potential **letter writers** who may not know you personally but are, in principle, familiar with your work through your **application materials**, such as course materials, publications, or presentations.

Reach out to these individuals, explaining your situation and providing comprehensive, **relevant information** about your achievements, skills, and career goals. Additionally, you can ask for **recommendations** from supervisors or colleagues who might not

have worked closely with you but can still provide a positive and informed perspective.



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Consider seeking letters from individuals who can speak to your character and **work ethic**, such as leaders of **extracurricular activities** or community service projects you have been involved in.

Lastly, when no personal connection exists, your detailed personal statement and a brag sheet can serve as crucial tools to guide your recommender in writing a more personalized and impactful letter.

Personal statements and brag sheets can be effective, but do not exaggerate; they should also be polite and humble. They should be tailored carefully to avoid appearing presumptuous or overwhelm the recommender with too much information.

WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO ASK FOR A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION?

Timing for Asking a Professor or Employer to Write a Letter

Timing is crucial when requesting a letter of recommendation. Thus, ask well before the due date of your application to respect their busy schedules. Respecting their time is essential when [writing your professor](#) or an employer.

Understanding the Application Deadline

Being aware of the application deadline and planning accordingly is essential. Ensure you **provide your recommender with a clear timeline** and all necessary materials well in advance of the deadline to **avoid any last-minute rush**.

Provide Ample Time

When requesting a recommendation letter, give your recommender much time to write a letter. Asking at the last minute can lead to a rushed letter that may not fully capture your abilities and achievements.

How Far in Advance Should You Request a Letter of Recommendation?

Request your recommendation or reference letter several weeks or even months before the due date. This gives your recommender enough time to write

a thorough and thoughtful letter without feeling pressured by a tight timeline.



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HOW TO PROPERLY ASK FOR A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION VIA EMAIL?

You should consider several rules when emailing your professor, a colleague, or a current or previous employer.

How to ask for a letter of recommendation via email? It is vital to have a defined goal in mind, to be clear and concise in your email, to address your professor appropriately, and to show appreciation for their time. Doing so allows you to effectively communicate your needs and establish a positive relationship with your professor.

Read more here: [How To Write My Professor](#)

Drafting a Recommendation Request Email

When drafting your email request, be clear and concise. Start with a polite introduction and explain the purpose of your request. Provide context about the opportunity you are applying for and why you seek their recommendation. Include a brief summary of your achievements and attach any relevant documents, such as your CV or application materials.

Key Elements to Include in Your Email

Your email should include the following elements: a polite greeting, an explanation of your request, a summary of your achievements, details about the opportunity, and a clear timeline for when the letter is needed. Additionally, offer to provide any further information they might need to write a strong recommendation.

WHAT MAKES A STRONG LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION?

Qualities and Content of a Strong Recommendation

A strong recommendation letter is detailed, specific, and highlights your key strengths and achievements. It should include examples of your work, character traits, and potential for future success.

Confidentiality is a crucial aspect, as it allows the recommender to be candid and honest in their assessment, which can add significant weight to the letter.

Many application platforms offer the option to waive your right to view the letter, signaling to admissions committees or potential employers that the recommendation is unbiased and sincere. This level of trust can enhance the credibility of your application.

Undoubtedly, you should only do this when you trust entirely the recommender.

Using AI and online document editors to write and format your recommendation letter

You will probably use AI text generators (ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, etc.) to write your application and online document editors and the built-in editor in online options to format your documents professionally. The wizard mode in some platforms can guide you through the entire procedure, making it easier to produce high-quality application materials.

Since everybody uses these tools, most application documents look very professional and do not stand out to selection committees anymore. However, **not** using them immediately gives you a disadvantage because your application documents might look sloppy.

HOW LONG SHOULD A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION BE?

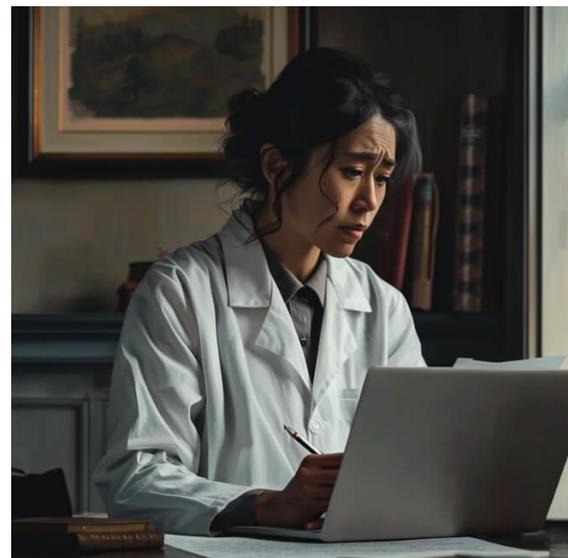
Please do not make the mistake to strive for long letters of recommendation. It is torture for the evaluator. A letter of

recommendation should typically be **one to two pages in length**.

This provides enough space to offer a detailed and meaningful assessment of the candidate's qualifications, skills, and character without overwhelming the reader. A concise letter that is well-organized and specific in its examples is far more effective than a lengthy one that lacks focus. The goal is to highlight the most relevant and impressive aspects of the candidate, ensuring the letter remains engaging and informative.

If your recommendation letter is longer than 2 pages, nobody will read it.

Guiding the Recommender to Write a Strong Letter



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To guide your recommender, provide them with a summary of your accomplishments and specific points you would like them to highlight, such as your work ethic and notable achievements.

Providing this information makes it easier for them to write a detailed and impactful

letter that can significantly bolster your application.

If you have a previous recommendation letter, you might use it to write a new draft for the recommender or provide it to make their life easier. You might also search the internet for “recommendation letter example” or “recommendation letter blueprint.”

You can guide your recommender by providing them with one of the following:

- A summary of your accomplishments and specific points you would like them to highlight. This can include your work ethic, key skills, and notable achievements.
- A previous recommendation letter
- A draft of a recommendation letter (use with caution, as some recommenders may find this offensive)

Providing one of these documents makes it easier for them to write a detailed and impactful letter.

HOW TO MAKE YOUR WRITTEN REQUEST STAND OUT?

Crafting a Persuasive and Thoughtful Request

Your **polite request** should be persuasive and thoughtful. Explain why you ask for their recommendation and how it will support your application. Provide specific examples of your achievements and how they relate to the opportunity you are applying for.

Be polite and learn about email etiquette before sending your request. Read more here: [How To Write My Professor](#).

Providing Context – Why You’re Asking This Person

Explain why you chose this particular person to write your recommendation. Highlight your relationship and their unique perspective on your abilities and achievements. This context can help them understand the importance of their letter and tailor it to support your application best.

Detailing Your Achievements and Goals

In your initial request, include a concise account of your achievements and career goals.

Do not write a lengthy email! Just select a few achievements that stand out.



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This helps your recommender understand your aspirations and how their letter can contribute to your success – **without wasting their time.**

HOW DO YOU MAKE IT EASIER FOR YOUR RECOMMENDER TO WRITE YOUR LETTER?

It is essential to make it as easy as possible for the recommender to provide a letter of recommendation to increase your chances that they will accept your request.

Typical mistakes when asking for a recommendation letter

During my career, I have reviewed many applications that were in a terrible state. Typical mistakes include:

- Multiple separate files that have to be opened individually
- Unclear numbering or file names, such as “application-3” and “application-7,” without explanation
- Unstructured lists of achievements
- No page numbers in long documents
- No easy-to-understand section headers to structure long documents
- Publication lists without requested [bibliometric parameters](#), such as impact factors or citations

If your documents are sloppy and waste the recommender’s time, they will be less willing to write you a great letter.

Supply Necessary Information for the Recommendation in an Easy-to-Process Format

Thus, read the application documents with care and apply the instructions as much as possible, making the process easier for your letter writer. Avoid at all costs that you must ask for corrections and a second or third version.

Make the process easier for a potential letter writer by providing them with all the important information they need to craft a detailed and supportive letter. Provide a phone number where your recommender can contact you if needed.

This might include the following items: a copy of your resume, bullet points of your academic performance, any relevant application materials, and specifics about the graduate program, grant, or new job you are applying for. Briefly explain your future plans and why you believe they are a good fit for writing you a strong recommendation.

Providing your recommenders with contact information and any specific questions they must address can result in a more effective letter. This may include the email address where the notification email will be sent and any online application portals they need to navigate.

If necessary, outline the submission process, whether through an application portal or other application platform, to ensure everything goes smoothly.

Be comprehensive and concise

However, there is a dilemma: You want to provide all the necessary information – but you do not want to overwhelm the recommender with dozens of documents. Thus, be concise and selective.

If in doubt, combine all necessary files in one or two well-structured documents with a list of contents. A good choice is a PDF format that does not change the format when opened on any device.



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SHOULD YOU PROVIDE A PRE-WRITTEN RECOMMENDATION LETTER?

This is a tricky question. Some professors might find this very pragmatic, and others might be offended by it. Thus, it is – for sure – a good idea to ask them whether they would like to get a draft they might use. If possible, ask this in a personal contact and not via email.

Providing a sample recommendation letter to your recommender can be a great idea to reduce the recommender's workload and save a great deal of time. It is a more efficient solution to help them craft the perfect letter.

They can slightly rewrite and adapt it to their style and eliminate mistakes or outrageous statements.

The potential risk of offering a pre-written letter is that it might undermine the authenticity of the recommendation.

However, ensure that the sample accurately reflects your academic abilities and achievements, avoiding any embellishment that might lead to a weak letter.

It is crucial to emphasize the importance of first asking the recommender if they would appreciate a draft rather than assuming.

FOLLOWING UP AFTER SENDING A REQUEST

Follow up politely!

A gentle reminder as the deadline approaches can be helpful. Send a polite follow-up email to ensure your letter writer has all they need and to remind them of the submission timeline. Never use an **automated email** reminder because it can easily go wrong.

This follow-up is crucial in [maintaining good communication](#) and ensuring the letter is submitted on time.

WHAT DO YOU DO IF THERE IS NO ANSWER?

After sending your initial request, sending a follow-up email is a good idea if you have not received a response **within a week or two**. This follow-up should be polite and reiterate your appreciation for their time and assistance.

Always conclude your requests and follow-ups with expressions of great respect and gratitude. You might attach the documents again for their convenience.

In some instances, requesting a backup letter from a recommender in a different department may be advantageous. This is particularly useful if you are applying to programs in unrelated fields or if you anticipate that your primary recommender may provide a lukewarm letter. Diverse perspectives can strengthen your application by showcasing various facets of your academic ability and personal character.



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If there is no reply after the reminder, consider it a lost case and ask another potential recommender.

HOW TO EXPRESS GRATITUDE? THE IMPORTANCE OF A THANK YOU NOTE AFTER RECEIVING A RECOMMENDATION LETTER

After receiving your recommendation letter, express your gratitude through a thank you note, either as an email or a handwritten note. It demonstrates common courtesy, fosters a good relationship, and leaves a strong impression.

This small gesture can leave a lasting positive impact on your recommenders, which might also benefit future applications or collaborations.

SPECIAL RULES TO ASK FOR A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION IN SPECIFIC CONTEXTS

Letters of reference or recommendation are required in many situations, such as applications for scholarships, fellowships, grants, new positions, awards and honors, and professional development programs. Each situation needs a slightly different approach.

Recommendation Letters for College applications

When preparing for college applications, securing strong recommendation letters is a crucial step. High school students should aim to ask academic teachers who can speak to their performance in core subjects such as mathematics, science, or social studies.

Engaging with your school counselor is a critical step in the college application process. They can provide invaluable support by advising on which academic teachers are best suited to write your rec letters. A school counselor can also help identify faculty members who have interacted with you during class discussions or office hours, ensuring your recommendation letters highlight your strengths and fit the specific program.

Planning this during your junior year can be a great way to ensure you have strong recommendations ready by your senior year. For high school seniors, building a strong relationship with high school teachers during your junior year is essential.

Teachers in core subjects like math, science, and English can provide strong recommendations based on your academic performance and participation in class discussions.

Engaging actively in these subjects ensures that you have academic teachers who can write insightful and supportive letters by your senior year.

Additionally, letters from teachers who have witnessed your extracurricular activities and leadership roles can provide a well-rounded view of your capabilities and character. Guidance counselors can

also provide valuable insights into your overall academic journey and personal growth.

Recommendation Letters for Scholarships and Fellowships

When preparing your scholarship application, it is crucial to understand the specific scholarship requirements and tailor your request for a letter of recommendation accordingly. This involves selecting academic advisors who can highlight your student's academic performance and demonstrate why you are a good candidate for the scholarship program.

Ensure that your recommenders are well-informed about the fellowship applications process. Provide them with all necessary documents, such as your statement of purpose, background information, and details about the fellowship committee. This helps them understand the context and tailor their letters to address the specific criteria of the fellowship.

In an academic setting, reference letters from academic teachers and faculty members are pivotal. They should highlight your hard work, academic performance, and participation in class discussions.

Encourage your recommenders to address the scholarship committee directly, emphasizing why you are the best candidate for the scholarship. They should mention your academic pursuit and how this scholarship will aid you in your higher studies.



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Undergraduate Scholarships

College professors, academic teachers, and academic advisors are pivotal in writing effective scholarship recommendation letters. They can speak to your academic excellence, performance in core subjects and extracurricular activities, leadership qualities, and other personality traits that make you a strong candidate.

If your financial need is a significant part of your application, ensure this is communicated to your recommender. This information can be vital for scholarship committees considering financial circumstances when making decisions.

Mentioning your financial aid situation can help paint a complete picture of your student's life and the importance of the scholarship to your higher education career.

Graduate Fellowships

Graduate students applying for prestigious fellowships should seek recommendations from professors or

research advisors who can attest to their research and academic abilities and potential for future contributions to their field.

This might also include specific details about your student's academic achievements, volunteer work, and any prestigious awards you have received. Mentioning your role as an active participant in extracurricular activities can also be beneficial.

Additionally, letters from former employers can provide a broader perspective on your work ethic and professional achievements, making your application stand out and significantly impacting how the fellowship committee perceives you.

Recommendation Letters for Grants and Funding Applications

Research Grants

Scientists applying for research grants need detailed letters from supervisors or colleagues who can validate their research capabilities and the impact of their proposed projects.

Travel Grants

For travel grants, letters from mentors who understand the significance of the conference or workshop and can speak to how it will benefit your career are ideal.

Recommendation Letters for Academic Positions

PhD Programs

For graduate program applications, selecting recommenders who can highlight your academic work and research experience is essential. Students applying to PhD programs should request letters from former professors or research advisors who can highlight their academic achievements and potential for advanced study.

This is especially important for PhD applicants aiming to impress PhD admissions committees with a detailed account of their scholarly contributions and research project successes.

For those applying to medical schools, professional references that highlight your personal qualities and suitability for the medical profession can be a deciding factor for the admission committee.

Requesting your letters in a timely manner is crucial. PhD programme applications often have stringent deadlines, and giving your recommenders sufficient time to write a comprehensive letter is respectful and strategic.

I learned that dossier services might streamline sending out multiple grad school recommendation letters. These services allow you to store and send your reference letters to various institutions, ensuring they are delivered in a timely manner and meet the specific requirements of each graduate application. I have no experience with

these services and can not judge their quality.

Postdoctoral Positions

Navigating the competitive job market as a postdoctoral researcher requires understanding the selection process and what search committees look for in candidates. Strong letters that emphasize your academic background and research interests can make you an ideal candidate.

When preparing for a postdoc application, choosing recommenders who can specifically address your research work and academic contributions is crucial. PhD students particularly benefit from recommendations from those who supervised their graduate study or thesis work.

Thus, these letters should ideally come from your current advisers or research group leaders who have closely worked with you. Their insight into your specific projects and potential for future research can provide the selection committee with a clear picture of your suitability for the position.

To help your recommender write a good letter, provide them with additional information, such as your statement of purpose, detailed descriptions of your research interests, and an overview of your academic background.

This background information allows them to craft a more personalized and impactful recommendation highlighting your technical skills and personal characteristics relevant to the postdoc position.

A compelling recommendation letter might also emphasize your personal

character (ambition, team player, [leadership skills](#), etc.); for example, contributions as a research assistant or a significant role in research projects that demonstrate your qualities as a true leader and a great candidate for the position or program.

Faculty Positions

When applying for faculty positions, seek letters from senior colleagues or mentors who can discuss your research achievements, teaching abilities, and suitability for the role. Beneficial are recommendations regarding your management and [leadership capabilities](#).

Recommendation Letters for Professional and Industry Positions

Industry Research Positions

Scientists transitioning to industry roles should seek recommendations from academic mentors or, ideally, previous industry supervisors who can highlight their relevant skills and experiences. Particularly useful are recommendations regarding your management and [leadership capabilities](#).

Consulting Roles

For consulting opportunities, letters from clients or collaborators who can speak to your problem-solving skills and professional expertise are valuable.

Recommendation Letters for Awards and Honors

For nominations for prestigious scientific awards, letters from influential colleagues or mentors who can attest to your contributions and impact in your field are essential.

Recommendation Letters for Professional Development Programs:

Workshops and Summer Schools

Scientists applying to advanced training programs or workshops should seek recommendations from mentors, deans, or rectors of their institution who can highlight their commitment to professional development and potential for growth.

Acknowledgments

I have used AI systems, including Grammarly, Google Gemini, and ChatGPT, to enhance the English and comprehensiveness of this article.

Recommended reading

The following articles may also interest you:

- [How To Write My Professor](#)
- [Best Books on Communication](#)
- [Best books on salary negotiation and getting a raise](#)
- [Why salary matters in science careers](#)
- [What is tenure?](#)
- [Is being a professor worth it?](#)

- [Free PhD programs versus fully funded PhD programs](#)
- [20 Strengths and Weaknesses of Leaders in Science](#)
- [How to become an expert in your scientific field?](#)
- [Am I good enough for a career in science?](#)
- [Will I find a job as a scientist?](#)