How to Ask for a Recommendation

(Modifed from Leonard Cassuto’s work published in the Chronicle of Higher Education)

It seems a simple enough question, and in a way, it is: "Would you write me a recommendation?" The reply will ordinarily be "Yes," and then professor and student head down a familiar path.

But the trip isn’t as simple as it seems. For starters, let’s consider who’s directing it. I may be writing the recommendation, but don’t think I’m in charge. The main responsibility rests with you — the student who’s asking for the letter.

That’s right: You’re guiding this process. When I write a recommendation for you, I’m working for you. Both of us, but especially you, want my letter to be as strong and persuasive as it possibly can be. That means you need to supervise me properly. Here are some guidelines for how to do that.

**First, supply me with everything I need.**  My writerly requirements will vary according to the type of letter you’re asking me to write, but I will always need a copy of your cover letter and resume (for a job request) or project statement (for a grant or fellowship) or personal statement (for undergraduates applying to graduate school). It’s OK to share a rough draft. The point is that I need to know how you’re presenting yourself, so I can craft an approach that complements yours. (See what I mean about you being in charge? You set the rhetorical course.)

Because you’re the one applying, you have to decide on your most persuasive strategy of self-presentation. You should also consider this if applying for something that requires multiple letters. Different people should be able to address multiple facets of your character and abilities. Of course I want to help you. But you’re the one who’s making that happen. I’m the one giving help and advice.

So decide what paperwork you should give me to support my task. If you took one of my courses, consider sending me copies of the best work you did for me. I may have taught you a year or two ago, perhaps longer. If I am to talk in useful detail about your paper or project, I may need it in front of me again.

The persuasive force of my letter will lie in its attention to detail. Don’t take for granted that I remember what you did. Even if I do, I may not recall the details. I may still have your work on file (especially now that we live in a paperless world), but why should you assume that? And even if I do have it, you should save me from having to locate it. Keep me in the best mood while writing your letter.

But don’t stop there. Maybe you did related work in a different course or a job that makes you look even more qualified. There’s no way that I can know about that unless you tell me. So talk to me about the other work you did and ask if I would like to see it for preparing your letter. Talk to me about any potential weaknesses that you would like me to address. Did you have a bad term because of a crisis in your life? We’re you struggling to find your calling, but then found it and now your effort and, therefore work, have improved? Discuss this with me so I can defend you in the letter.

Provide all of this — the statement, work samples, anything else you want me to include — to a single email so everything is in one place. (And then confirm that I received it.) Simplest is best: One clearly marked virtual package will set me up to do my best work for you.

**Direct me.** Yes, you need to tell me what to do — or, to put it less roughly, you need to describe what you need from me. Students often think that recommendation writing is a black box whose inner workings they’re powerless to understand or affect. We professors encourage that belief by cloaking what we do in a deliberately mysterious mantle of "confidentiality." Even with all of our fetishistic secrecy, your powerlessness is a fallacy. You’re only powerless if you step away.

Let’s say you’re applying for admission to a Ph.D. program and you’re asking me for a recommendation. Such applications require multiple references, usually three or more. You can make your recommendation requests and then modestly withdraw, but why should you limit your influence that way? Instead, imagine your recommenders as your panel, a group you’ve recruited to advocate for you. Actually, you don’t need to imagine that — it’s an actual fact. So imagine us as a group of musicians, with yourself as the conductor. How can you orchestrate our efforts to your greatest advantage?

To answer, let’s follow this little thought experiment a bit further. Perhaps you did good writing for all of your recommenders, but I taught you in a small class. In that case, you could remind me of your active participation and your excellent oral presentation because you know that of all of your recommenders, I’m best qualified to describe those qualities in you. So make an explicit request: "I was hoping that in your letter, you might be able to emphasize … " This also goes back to the advice above. Different recommenders should be able to address different qualities in you. Carefully consider who you ask to write a letter. Do three professors all see you in the same way? Do you have a coach, a club or academic advisor, a supervisor, or an administrator that views you differently and would be able to write favorably about different qualities?

We recommenders welcome your guiding suggestions because we’re working for you. Without specific guidance, I might focus on your writing and give short shrift to something important to your application.

**Be clear about deadlines, and give me enough time to meet them.** Like every other professor I know, I receive last-minute recommendation requests. Most of us take these in stride and do as well as we can, but that doesn’t mean we’re happy about it. Eleventh-hour labor does not produce my best work.

So manage your application calendar. Some students applying for multiple fellowships even supply me with spreadsheets with the due dates and destinations for each required letter. And don’t be afraid to remind me if the deadline grows nigh. I usually manage my workload pretty well, but I know that my letter is important to you, and I won’t be offended if you check in to make sure that I didn’t forget about it.

Academe is a culture of evaluation. It binds our community together and comes in many forms — student admissions folders, article and book manuscripts, tenure and promotion applications, classroom visits, grant and fellowship applications, and reams of other assessment work. The system requires those letters, and unless you’re doing something silly, like asking me for a recommendation when I gave you a C, I expect to write letters for students.

Also, and this is one of the most difficult things for you in this process, consider if the person is capable of writing a good letter. I don’t mean writing a positive recommendation vs. a negative one (although more on that below). I mean are they capable of decent writing. I have served on search committees and grad school admissions committees and read many letters of recommendation. I have seen letters that were two lines. “This person is great, and I think you should hire them. Sincerely…” No joke. They didn’t expand or provide any evidence for their claim. This is not good. I also have seen people that simply write poorly, where the sentences don’t make much sense to ones that have poor grammar and punctuation. While this can generally be overlooked in evaluation, readers can discount the writer’s perspective and thus the whole letter to some extent. Is this fair? No. Is it the applicant’s fault? Probably not…but could be. Perhaps they should have considered this when asking for the letter. In the end, you’re trying to present yourself in the best light possible. Clearly, I don’t think this is a problem with me, but you should consider this when asking.

Finally, to date, I have never agreed to write a letter for a student, and then proceeded to write a bad one, purposely low-balling their application and effectively ruining their chances of achieving their goals…and I don’t anticipate this ever changing. I personally feel that this is simply unethical. I do, however, know some colleagues who have. So, please be careful who you ask. When you ask, be specific. “Would you be willing to write me a favorable recommendation for a scholarship I’m applying for?” They should be willing to tell the truth. And if you follow this advice of discussing your situation and providing all of the things the professor needs, you should also get a good feeling of whether the person intends to write you a good recommendation or not.