

# Recommendation Letters

## General

I am, in general, delighted to write letters in support of graduate school and fellowship applications and to serve as a reference for students and advisees with whom I have worked for at least a year. This usually means you have taken two courses with me or I have been your academic advisor or project supervisor for an academic year. Exceptions always possible, especially during your first year.

You should always ask yourself whether I am (one of) the right person(s) for the task? The best letter is going to be written by someone who has seen you at your best, has seen you develop over time, and has seen your work in sufficient quantity to be able to offer concrete examples of why you make a good candidate for whatever it is you are applying for. Just because we know each other and I would probably be willing to does not necessarily make me the best person for the job.

Another way to frame this is to recognize that it is almost always possible to write a bland letter that says "I've known X for Y semesters. She was a student in my Z class. She was an active participant and earned an A- in the course. My overall impression is that she is a serious student who is passionate about W." But that's pretty unlikely to get you into Harvard or get you an interview for the Rhodes Scholarship. Do I know enough about you based on the work we have done together that I can contribute to making a compelling case for you?

## Common Issues

- It is almost never a problem to write another letter once the first one is done. So don't ever worry about asking for too many.
- If there are forms to fill out, fill out EVERYTHING you can. There's nothing more annoying than having to write my name and address and title and affiliation on five forms when you could have done that for me.
- Do not fret about stamps and envelopes. I will always send out letters on letterhead in letterhead envelopes at the college's expense. I have a huge pile of pre-stamped, pre-addressed manilla envelopes in my office. Unfortunately, I am not a philatelist.
- If you need a letter "next week" it will not be submitted by the deadline.
- Mentioning that you will be applying for something well in advance of having materials ready for me is a good use of office hours.

## Advance Notice

For actual letters I would prefer to get materials from you about **six weeks prior** to the due date. If the program requires you to collect letters and mail everything in a single package that means six weeks prior to when you want to have things in your hands. For programs that have a simple online form with no expectation of a letter a month suffices. NOTE that these days the most common thing is to have an online form WITH a letter that is uploaded in PDF form; those are still six weeks.

# "I Might Want a Letter from You Someday"

If we do not have a relationship before you graduate, it's unlikely we will have one later. Even if you are not planning on applying for anything before, or right after, you leave the institution you should cultivate potential letter writers while you are here. At the absolute minimum you should ask before you leave: "would it be OK if I asked you for a letter someday?" More helpful is to put together a skeletal version of the materials described below and send them along saying, "I don't need to ask for a letter now, but I'd like to explore keeping the option open for later. Can you let me know if you'd be OK with that?"

But what does "cultivate" mean beyond just asking? I would have to sum it up as "establish your credibility." Be actively engaged in classes, connect with me outside of class, work hard, learn stuff. Come back for more. Show up to things on time. If you will be late or have to miss an appointment, notify me ahead of time. Or apologize after. Take yourself seriously. Show me your best stuff. Make sure I see that you are one of the ones who really wants to learn. Take risks, make mistakes, and get better and better at things over time. Talk with me about your aspirations. Ask questions other than "will this be on the exam?" or "what do you want us to do?"

## What to Provide

You should send me

- Details about the the program or criteria for the fellowship
- your resume or c.v.,
- Transcript
- Draft of your personal statement or some such so that I can see how you are "selling" yourself
- A reminder of what we did together and when (what courses/projects/etc.) so I don't misremember
- If relevant, whom else are you getting letters from.

None of these need to be in highly polished form. Do not delay getting them to me because your personal statement is not done yet or because your resume needs some revising. A draft or outline or just talking points is fine.

Best is to assemble all of these in a single PDF file called YOURNAME-Rec-Req-YYYYMMDD.PDF that you send to me in email or share via DropBox or GoogleDrive or similar. Second best would be a stapled bundle of paper pages. Least best is 6 separate files with cryptic names attached to an email.

It would be cool to create an event in your calendar program for the deadline and then invite me to it.

## Employment References

In general, employment references involve providing contact information only. You should send me a note saying "may I list you as a reference for X?" Once we have agreed, you can put me down for other jobs in the same employment seeking episode. If a lot of time passes you might want to check

in with me again. I recommend you provide my email address as contact information as I do not often enough pay attention to my office telephone.