

A Guide to Requesting Letters of Recommendation: Ensuring Strong Support for Your Applications

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Letters of Recommendation (LORs) play a crucial role in our field, significantly impacting applications for graduate school, academic positions, and industry jobs. While writing these letters is primarily a PI responsibility **and part of your PI's job**, there are several steps you can take to ensure you receive a strong and effective letter. This guide aims to demystify the process and provide you with practical advice for securing impactful letters of recommendation.

Determining When to Request a Letter

As a general policy, I (James) will write a letter for any student or lab member who has worked in the lab for at least three months. This timeframe allows me to adequately evaluate your work and contributions. For shorter-term lab members, letters may be provided in exceptional circumstances, such as new graduate students or postdocs applying for fellowships.

If you've only taken a class with me and haven't worked in the lab, I may not be the strongest letter writer for you. In such cases, I can only speak to your performance in class. However, if you need a letter and don't have better options, you're welcome to ask.

How to Request a Letter of Recommendation

To ensure a smooth process and a strong letter, please follow these guidelines:

1. **Provide ample notice:** Request the letter at least three weeks before the deadline. More time is always appreciated.
2. **Submit key information in a single email:** Please don't use Slack for this request. Include:
 - The letter deadline
 - Key points to focus on:
 - What you hope I will highlight about you
 - How your application will be evaluated
 - Why I am particularly well-suited to write your letter
 - Any materials you've submitted as part of your application (draft materials are acceptable)
 - Clear instructions on how to submit the letter
 - A critical self-assessment: Discuss your strengths and areas for growth
3. **Keep communication open:** Provide updates as the deadline approaches.

Best Practices for Securing Strong Letters

To maximize the effectiveness of your letters of recommendation, consider the following resources:

- Read Matt Might’s article on [“How to get a great letter of recommendation”](#). It offers valuable insights into the process.
- Review this informative [Twitter thread by Dr. Arianna Long](#), which details how she improved her application success rate, with a focus on securing strong letters of recommendation.

Remember, the strength of your letter of recommendation depends not only on my writing but also on the groundwork you lay in preparing your request and providing comprehensive information. By following these guidelines, you can significantly enhance the quality and impact of your letters of recommendation.

If you have any questions about this process, please don’t hesitate to reach out. I’m here to support your academic and professional growth.

Tip

Note: Shout out to the [Peelle Lab](#) at Washington University in Saint Louis for contributing some of the specific language used in this guide.