

Letters of Recommendation

How to Get the Best Letters of Recommendation for Your College Application

By Allen Grove, About.com Guide

Nearly all college applications require letters of recommendation. These guidelines will help you know who and how to ask for letters.

1. Ask the Right People to Recommend You

Many students make the mistake of getting letters from distant acquaintances who have powerful or influential positions. The strategy often backfires. Your aunt's neighbor's stepfather may know Bill Gates, but Bill Gates doesn't know you well enough to write a meaningful letter. This type of celebrity letter will make your application seem superficial. The best recommenders are those teachers, coaches, and mentors you have worked with closely. Choose someone who can speak in concrete terms about the passion and energy that you bring to your work.

2. Ask Politely

Remember, you are asking for a favor. Your recommender has a right to refuse your request. Don't assume that it is anyone's duty to write a letter for you, and realize that these letters take a lot of time out of your recommender's already busy schedule. Most teachers, of course, will write you a letter, but you should always frame your request with the appropriate "thank yous" and gratitude.

3. Allow Enough Time

Don't request a letter on Thursday if it is due on Friday. Respect your recommender and give him or her a couple weeks minimum to write your letters. Your request already imposes on your recommender's time, and a last-minute request is an even greater imposition.

4. Provide Detailed Instructions

Make sure your recommenders know exactly when the letters are due and where they should be sent. Also, be sure to tell your recommenders what your goals are for college so that they can focus the letters on relevant issues.

5. Provide Stamps and Envelopes

You want to make the letter-writing process as easy as possible for your recommenders. Be sure to provide them with the appropriate pre-addressed stamped envelopes. This step also helps ensure that your letters of recommendation will get sent to the right location.

6. Don't Be Afraid to Remind Your Recommenders

Some people procrastinate and others are forgetful. You don't want to nag anyone, but an occasional reminder is always a good idea if you don't think your letters have been written yet. You can accomplish this in a polite way. Avoid a pushy statement like, "Mr. Smith, have you written my letter yet?" Instead, try a polite comment such as, "Mr. Smith, I just want to thank you again for writing my letters of recommendation." If Mr. Smith hasn't actually written the letters yet, you've now reminded him of his responsibility.

7. Send Thank You Cards

After the letters have been written and mailed, follow up with thank you notes to your recommenders. A simple card shows that you value their efforts. It's a win-win situation: you end up looking mature and responsible, and your recommenders feel appreciated.