

How to Get a Good Recommendation

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So, you are applying for an internship, or for graduate school, or perhaps for that first professional job, and the application calls for recommendations. What can you do to increase your chances of getting the glowing recommendation letters that will help you land that position? This document lays out a few simple steps that can make a big difference.

Target Your Recommenders

Before asking someone to write a letter of recommendation for you, think about what they will be able to say about you. The instructor of that course you took three years ago where you always arrived late to lecture, sat in the back of the room, and never contributed to the discussion may barely remember you, even if you got an A. Even if you get along well with a particular instructor, they may not really have much basis for recommending you unless you have done something beyond sit in class and turn in the homework. You want someone who can talk about more than what grade you got.

Your first choice should be someone with whom you have worked directly, perhaps as a Teaching or Research Assistant. If you held an off-campus job, your manager or supervisor might be able to discuss your work habits and your reliability. Consider instructors of classes where you earned an A on a major self-directed or team-oriented project; these people might be able to talk about your ability to complete a non-trivial project with a minimum of supervision or your ability to work effectively with others. Faculty advisors of student organizations in which you are active may be able to talk about your leadership skills and your ability to follow through on commitments.

Prepare an Information Packet

You can greatly reduce the time it takes your recommender to write a great letter for you by assembling the facts that the person will need. This packet should include both information about the position and information about you.

The information about the position should include

- The name and mailing address of the person to whom the recommendation letter should be addressed. Get a name if at all possible; at the very least, get the correct name and address of the committee or department that will be handling your employment application (which may be different than the department that has the opening)
- The exact name and address of the company or graduate school, and the exact name of the division or department or research group that has the opening
- The exact title of the position
- As much information as possible about the nature of the position, including the posted qualifications and any other information you may have found, either formally or informally, about the kind of person they are looking for. For graduate school, this might include the average GRE scores of accepted students and the research group or faculty that you hope to work with
- The date by which the letter is needed

The information about you should include

- A copy of your current resume, if you have one
- Your GPA overall and in major. If, as with many students, your early scholastic performance was regrettable but has since improved, also supply your recent GPA, e.g., for the past two years
- The roles in which you have interacted with the recommender, e.g., as student in a course taught by the person, as research assistant, as a volunteer in extra-curricular activities, as an employee. Include dates for each type of contact, e.g., "Research assistant, June 2002-present"

- Courses taken from the recommender, including the semester taken and the grade you received. If you did any special work, such as a term project of your own design or an honors project, briefly describe it and mention the grade you received on that project
- Technical electives, research participation, or other professional experience that may contribute to your qualifications for the position, even if this recommender was not directly involved. Supply dates, grades, full citations for publications, supervising professor, etc.
- Your long-term goals, e.g., advanced degrees, what you hope to be doing in ten years. Explain why these are your goals. This is especially important for graduate school and internship positions
- Awards, scholarships, or other recognitions you may have received. Be sure to explain what each was for, date awarded, and the exact name of the awarding organization
- Other activities or accomplishments that may shed light on your skills, abilities, or character, such as officer or chair positions in student or civic organizations, volunteer work for the department or for community organizations, outstanding member awards, letters of thanks. Your recommender need not have been involved with these things but still may wish to comment upon them. Again, supply dates and exact information about titles, names, description of accomplishments, and other particulars
- Why you think you are the right person for this job
- How to reach you should the recommender need any additional information

You may feel a bit awkward documenting your own accomplishments; it may seem as if you are bragging or trying to tell the recommender what to write. Speaking as a person who writes recommendations frequently, however, I can assure you that it is a big help not to have to stop and look up details. Also, I may simply forget about something that would have helped your application. By providing this information, you save your recommenders time in preparing their recommendations and ensure that your accomplishments are not overlooked inadvertently.

Pop the Question

Ask for the recommendation in person, if at all possible: make an appointment, or find out when the person's office hours are. Bring your packet with you. Be upbeat and enthusiastic during this brief-but-important meeting: you're selling yourself to the prospective recommender, in a sense. If you don't act like you believe in your ability to do this job, why should the recommender want to vouch for you?

Begin your meeting by briefly describing the position you are applying for and explaining why you think that this person will be able to speak to your qualifications for that position. Memorize this sentence: "Would you feel comfortable writing a strong, positive recommendation for me for this position?"

If the person says "yes," hand them your information packet and briefly point out the contents. Offer to supply any other information they may need. Mention the due date, if any. Give your heartfelt thanks.

If the person looks uncomfortable or says "no," do not press too hard for a "yes" answer. Instead, thank the person for taking the time to talk to you. Remember: a luke-warm recommendation isn't going to help, and it may even torpedo your chances for that job.

Do not ask for a generic letter that you can photocopy for future job applications. While these may be acceptable for a minimum-wage burger-flipping job, they carry little weight for professional positions. Your future employer wants a frank assessment of your ability to fill their opening, one that doesn't pull punches to avoid hurting your feelings. This means that every recommendation letter should be written to a specific person at a specific company about a specific position, and that the prospective employer should know that you have not seen the contents of the letter. Usually, the recommender sends the letter directly to the prospective employer. If the application specifies that the letters are to be mailed with your application packet, ask your recommender to place the letter in a sealed envelope and to sign across the flap before giving it to you.

Follow Up

It's a good idea remind the recommender a few days before the letters are due, just in case. This also gives you another chance to thank them.