

Getting Great References & Letters of Recommendation

You'll probably ask for references, recommendations, or letters of support over a dozen times throughout your career—for internships and competitive scholarships, jobs and graduate programs, maybe even for grants, promotions or professional recognition. Solid endorsements can make a huge difference in all these situations. So how do you get a good recommendation? Obviously, by working hard and building strong, genuine relationships* with your teachers, supervisors, and colleagues. But there's a lot more you can do to make the process easier for them, and more effective for you.

Before you even ask:

- **Do your research.** Read through the entire application, program description, or job posting to make sure you understand what you're applying for and why. Research your possible recommenders, too—how well do they know you and your work? How well do you know *them* and *their* work? You might discover that they have strong connections in the area you're applying to; if so, can you ask for an introduction? If not, what might they need to know about the opportunity you're asking them to recommend you for?
- **Discuss it in person.** Ask for a short meeting—15 minutes or so in person—or a focused email conversation to talk in general terms about the opportunity. Let them know where you're thinking about applying and start by asking for their opinion: What do you know about this program? Is this job opening potentially a good fit for me? What do you think I could expect from this experience? Aside from the obvious financial benefits, how might receiving a fellowship like this be helpful to me in the future?
- **Remember that recommenders get something from this process, too.** A teacher, mentor, or employer who has worked with you has already invested time and effort in you. Getting the chance to show their professional peers they're a good judge of talent and can produce smart, skilled graduates from their programs helps them build social capital. Yes, you're asking them for a favor, but you're also giving them the opportunity to hitch their wagon to your star and claim some share of your future success.
- **Let them help you in other ways.** During your conversation, they may offer a recommendation themselves. If they don't, it's OK to feel them out—"I'd like your advice about letters of recommendation. I know my supervisor at work would write one for me, but in this instance, do you think it would be more helpful to have a professional or an academic reference?" Even if they can't or won't write the reference themselves, they can help a lot in talking with you. They may steer you toward someone you hadn't

* Note: Facebook-friending and Twitter-following do not—at least not by themselves—count as “strong, genuine relationships.” You gotta go deep here, people.

thought of asking, but who has better connections in the area you're applying to and whose endorsement of you might carry particular weight. Or they might offer valuable advice on how to most effectively focus your cover letter or application essay. Go in with open ears, take notes, and make the most of your time with them!

When you make your request:

- **Assemble and provide all the necessary information.** An email that just says "I was wondering if you would write me a letter of recommendation for the Such-and-Such Scholarship this year. Please let me know if you think you'll be able to do this," might seem straightforward to you. But to your reference, it'll read more like "Tag—you're it!" When you request a recommendation, concisely offer your prospective recommender *everything* they might need to know. Provide a copy of (or link to) the job posting, program web site, or scholarship application instructions, so they know exactly what you're applying for. Send a copy of your current c.v. or resume, and a draft of your cover letter, if you have one at that point, so they know exactly what you've been up to since you last talked to them. Copies of any supplemental materials you'll be including, such as writing samples or completed application forms, will also be helpful, so they know how you're presenting yourself to the hiring committee or application reviewers.

A great letter of recommendation complements the rest of your application, and provides compelling detail on you as a prospect for that specific opportunity. If you give your recommender a sense of how you're presenting yourself, he or she can try to highlight outstanding qualities that might not be evident from your cover letter and resume. Last but not least, sending a packet like this means you'll have another pair of eyes going over what you're submitting—they might catch an embarrassing typo!

- **Be clear about timing.** Don't make recommenders comb through the application instructions for the deadline—that should be stated clearly in your initial request. Give recommenders as much lead time as possible, and let them know when you're planning to submit your materials. This is especially important if their letter has to go in along with your own submission.
- **Be clear about the process.** Requirements for submitting letters of recommendation can vary a great deal—some places will want actual letters mailed directly from the recommenders on official letterhead; some want them sent in signed, sealed envelopes along with the rest of your application packet; others accept emails or faxed copies. It's also increasingly common for graduate programs and big organizations to use an online reference submission process, where the recommender gets emailed directly with a link prompting them to submit their recommendation via a secure form.

As with deadlines, you don't want to make your recommenders figure all this out on their own. Provide clear, simple instructions for how they'll be submitting their letter

when you make your initial request. Be sure to include the recipients' name(s), mailing address, email, or fax number, as appropriate.

- **Leave the door open.** It's always a good idea to offer a graceful "out" when you're asking a favor like this (*especially* if you're asking on really short notice). Acknowledge that your prospective recommender might have other demands on their time, or a conflict of interest that you may not be aware of. They may be your *first* choice, but you probably have others, so if they feel they must decline, reassure them that they won't be leaving you in the lurch. It's far better to get an honest "no" with plenty of lead time than a reluctant "maybe" that turns into "sorry, I can't" at the last minute!
- **Don't make assumptions about the hiring process.** Prospective employers usually check references in the late stages of hiring, when they've interviewed multiple candidates and identified one or two they're really serious about. But in some cases, references may be checked between rounds of interviews, or *before* interviews are even scheduled. If you hear from a reference that they've been called early, that may or may not be a sign of serious interest; however, it's definitely a chance to get more information that may be helpful to you. What questions did they ask? What was your reference's impression? How did they present you as a candidate? Take time to say thanks to your reference, and discuss how their conversation might be helpful when you interview.

While you're waiting to hear:

- **Keep in touch.** Once someone recommends you for a job, internship, scholarship, or grad program, you should think of them as part of your team—they have a little something riding on this along with you, and like to feel like they've contributed in some small way to your success. Stay in touch with your recommenders, especially if you're contacted for an interview or follow-up. This gives your references a heads-up that they might be contacted about you, too!
- **Send a combination reminder/thank-you note.** About a week before the deadline, it's a good idea to send a message that can function as both a thank-you note *and* a gentle reminder. "I just wanted to let you know that I've sent off the last of my application materials for the Such-and-Such Summer Internship Program. If you've already sent your letter of recommendation, thank you! If it's on your to-do list for this week, that's great; as long as it's in their hands by [deadline date] my application will receive full consideration. I appreciate your support, and will let you know as soon as I hear anything!" Your reminder might come just when they were about to forget about this task—or they might let you know they already sent it, so you don't have to fret about it.
- **Don't catch your references off-guard.** If you're sending out a lot of applications, and someone's given you standing permission to list them as a general reference, be sure you keep them updated even if there's not time to meet and discuss every single

opportunity. You might, for instance, send out a weekly summary message listing all of the positions you've applied for recently. Include copies of or links to the position descriptions and an indication that you've listed them as a reference. If any of those prospective employers or internship sites calls them out of the blue, it will make *you* look bad if they have to ask what the job is, or if they're not completely prepared to say why you're the perfect candidate for it.

Afterward:

- **Let everyone know how things turn out.** Whether or not you get a job or a place in a grad program, your references are part of your team; keep them in the loop. They might offer a timely pep talk if you're feeling disappointed or discouraged by a recent rejection. If your interview experience was weird or the job was not quite as advertised, that's good for your references to know, too. If the recommendation was for a job, ask them to keep you in mind if they hear of new openings, since you're still on the market.
- **Send a thank-you note.** Again, regardless of the outcome, send your recommenders a thank-you note that acknowledges their time and effort, and lets them know you appreciate their support. Whether you send a handwritten note or just a quick personal email, it's the classy thing to do. It also shows how conscientious you are...something else they can mention the next time they recommend you!

Stage/Task	Action	Done?
Before		
Research prospect(s)	Read application materials Confirm your eligibility & position requirements	
Prepare	Book a meeting to talk (in person, Skype, or phone) Bring a list of questions and copies of the job posting	
Discuss	Take notes and listen carefully	
During		
Assemble packet	Copy/link to program description, job posting, etc. Current resume, cover letter draft, supplementals	
Submit request	Include deadlines and clear submission instructions	
Status update(s)	Indicate when you've submitted your own material	
Reminder/thank -you	Send approximately 1 week before final deadline	
After		
Follow up on outcome(s)	Notify your references when you've interviewed	
Send a thank-you note	Show appreciation for their time and support	