

How to ask for a reference letter

Straightforward advice for job candidates in search of a professorial recommendation

By ADAM CHAPNICK | March 9, 2009

It is one of the most critical steps in a graduate student's path to permanent academic employment, yet ironically it's also one of the most mysterious. Asking a professor for a letter, or more likely many letters, of reference can be stressful, and rarely are students instructed on proper etiquette. Fortunately, the process doesn't have to be intimidating.

The first thing to keep in mind is that the vast majority of professors understand that writing letters of reference is part of their job. Even better, most take pride in being able to help their students succeed in their academic careers and understand that students might not know how to best approach them. Some even go so far as to post instructions for students seeking letters on their websites. But if yours doesn't, here are some helpful tips on how to get the references you need.

Who to choose and when to approach them

Not every professor will make the best referee, and some are better for certain applications than others. Although there is little specific research on this issue, anecdotal evidence from academics who have experience on selection committees suggests that you should choose referees based on three criteria (in order of importance):

- How well did I do in the professor's course(s) / how well did I perform as a TA or RA?
- How well does the professor know me and/or my work and how up-to-date is that knowledge?
- Will the professor's reputation carry weight with the selection committee?

Since professors are asked to rank their students' past and future abilities in any letter of reference, it makes little sense to solicit a recommendation from someone who cannot say that your work stands out. Convincing letters also give the reader a sense that the professor knows the student well. More recent knowledge is therefore more credible. Finally, a professor who is well known to a committee is particularly credible. Aim to create a list of potential referees five to six weeks before the letter is due and make sure that your list includes at least one or two more names than you need (in case professors are less impressed than you are with your record or simply are not available to write).

The moment you've decided who to approach, find out whether any of those professors have reference letter policies. If they do, follow their directions. If not, approach your professors in the way that you are accustomed to dealing with them. If a potential referee has always been slow to respond to e-mail, then make an appointment to speak in person. If you know that a professor prefers to work from home, a well-written e-mail is appropriate.

What to say and what to give them

In your initial approach, make sure that each professor

- knows who you are;
- understands that you are seeking a strong reference;
- knows why you would like a letter from them specifically;
- understands that you face a deadline.

Full disclosure up front should prevent a reluctant yes. And when it comes to letters of reference, an unenthusiastic recommendation can be worse than no letter at all.

Be prepared to provide any referee with a package of information about you immediately.

It should include:

- an unofficial copy of your academic history (transcripts) along with an explanation of any aberrations (low grades, missing years, etc.);
- an updated resumé or CV;
- a draft of any statement of interest or research proposal that will be included in your application;
- any forms that the referee will be asked to fill out.
- Fill in all of your personal information, along with as much of the professor's as possible, in advance;
- an additional sheet with your personal contact details;
- a covering letter that reiterates who you are, the program or position that interests you and why, when the letter is due, what the professor should do with it once it's finished (will you pick it up? Should it be mailed to you in a supplied, stamped, self-addressed envelope? Should it be mailed directly to the institution at the address you have included on an address label?), and any additional instructions.

Ask your referees if they would also like:

- a writing sample and/or copy of the professor's comments on your work;
- you to mail the letters and therefore cover the postage (don't stamp your own envelopes because most professors will want to put the letters in a departmental one);
- a reminder note or phone call a week before the letter is due.

Thank you etiquette

Always let your professor know whether the application has been successful. If you anticipate asking for additional letters, send yearly updates about your progress. No further signs of appreciation are necessary but, if you insist, a kind, detailed e-mail that your referee can include in his or her teaching dossier, is a good idea.

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