

How to request a letter of recommendation Sharyn Clough, OSU

When:

Plot a time-line based on the following:

- (1) when the application deadlines are of your six-to-nine preferred schools,
- (2) when the relevant admissions tests are being offered (GREs, LSATs, MCATs),
- (3) when prep courses for the admissions tests are offered in your local area, and
- (4) when you will need to line up professors for recommendations. Note that each of these actually happens earlier than the one before it. Most university deadlines are in the November, December, January or February before the fall you enter, but if you want letters from us to arrive well before a December deadline, you'll need to ask us by September so we have time, advanced notice, and the opportunity to meet with you and discuss your application materials and our letters. This means you will be asking us for letters a year in advance of admission to a graduate program.

Who:

Advice abounds on the Internet but generally authors agree that letters should come from at least one if not two or three academics who can say something specific and largely positive about your scholarly performance and your potential for success. These are usually professors with whom you have taken at least one and preferably more courses.

How:

The best practices of asking have many aspects. Write with politeness and the formality appropriate to the importance of this request (and it *is* important). You may be drinking buddies or Frisbee golfers with your instructor, but when you ask for a letter, you're asking to add to the professor's job duties of the day so that they can assist in advancing your professional goals. This is a matter concerning both of your careers. It is not to be taken lightly.

1. Use a reasonably presentable email address. This is not the time to use hellokittyburpz at yahoo.
2. State your business in the subject line: applying to graduate school (for example). Subject lines that say "hey" or "hi" deserve to be filtered out as junk.
3. Ask, don't tell. It is not guaranteed that any of us will write a letter, and there are many reasons why a professor might have to decline.
4. Provide all the necessary information we might need in the request, sparing us the necessity of asking and jogging the memories of the fuzzy! See the next section:

What:

The more you provide instructors, the more information we have to say that we can write a letter, and the more specific those letters can be. Admissions committees get tons of vague letters (“I had Bob in a class a few years ago and he was nice”). You need your letter to be specific, well-informed, and true.

1. All letters are expected to start with the information as to how we know our students and in what capacity. So please tell us! Tell professors exactly what courses you had with them, including course code and title, exactly when, including semester and year, and exactly what grades you received in said courses. We have thousands of students and can't track this down for you. You're asking us for these letters, so tell us what we need to make them good.
2. State the programs and schools to which you're applying, and ideally, why you are applying to these programs in particular.
3. Your unofficial transcripts (note courses you took with them).
4. A draft of your statement of purpose or personal statement (whatever the applications are asking for), plus writing sample if it is part of an application.
5. A copy of your best work in the course(s) you've taken with the instructor you're asking for the letter (preferably a graded paper with instructor comments on it), and if you don't have those anymore, then a narrative about a great moment for you in the course, a strong paper, a learning experience, a bad day that was interesting because you learned something, or a flash of insight you had, anything specific that would be just one thing I could point to, etc.
6. Your resume or CV.

Why:

The reason you would do all this is to get a good letter that really reflects your academic performance and character and features your distinctive work and strengths. If you don't do all this, it is still possible that I could write a so-so letter. But you'd then be competing for entrance to the program of your choice with students who did the above and got much, much better letters. So if you want to increase the chances that you'll succeed, you'll do all of the above.