

Guide to Asking for a Letter of Recommendation

Some day you will need a letter of recommendation from a professor—probably many letters over the years!— whether you are applying for a job on campus, a study abroad opportunity, a scholarship, a job after graduation, or admission to graduate school. Your professors care about you and want you to succeed, but writing such letters is a lot of work for them; it's up to you to make the process as smooth as possible, by following the steps below.

1. **Choose your recommenders wisely.**

Ask professors who know you well and who can say positive things about you from direct knowledge. For example, don't ask your advisor for a letter about academic achievement if you have never taken a course with that person. Don't ask someone who has known you for less than a full semester (half a semester for a less-detailed recommendation, such as an on-campus job).

2. **ASK WELL IN ADVANCE of the deadline.**

The amount of lead time a faculty member needs depends on how elaborate the recommendation needs to be. A short recommendation done on a pre-made form doesn't take as long as a letter to graduate schools. Give 2 weeks at minimum, or 4-6 weeks for a longer letter. For grad school, this means asking your recommenders in September or October. Be sure that you really want to apply for the thing before asking, though—nothing is worse for a recommender than to put a lot of time into writing a letter, and then to be told at the last minute “Oh, I changed my mind about that fellowship.”

3. **Ask the recommender in person if at all possible.**

Come to office hours or schedule an appointment; don't ambush a professor right before or after class. If you live far away, it is acceptable to call or email, but otherwise, show how seriously you take the matter by showing up in person.

4. **Come to the appointment prepared with the materials the recommender will need, including:**

- your résumé
- your transcript and personal statement if the letter is for grad school
- the best paper you wrote for a class with the recommender
- ALL the forms and other paperwork required by the various schools, employers, etc.
- addressed envelopes for paper letters, or a list of addresses (ask the recommender which)
- if there are several letters to be written, a cover sheet listing all the due dates for each, and Web addresses for any of the forms that are electronic

During the appointment, **be prepared to discuss** why you want the recommendation, what makes you suited for the thing you are applying for, and any special criteria of evaluation the recommender should know about for individual jobs/scholarships/grad schools, etc.

5. **Be sure you have correctly filled out all the sections of the forms that are supposed to be completed by you, ESPECIALLY YOUR SIGNATURE.**

6. **Send the professor a reminder about a week before the letters are due.**

They're only human and might forget the deadlines, especially if there are several different ones. Since UNCP doesn't have a letter service, and because you really need the letters to remain confidential, the recommender is going to have to fill out lots of Web forms, mail lots of envelopes, etc. Help him or her remember the deadlines, but be subtle—don't harass the person.

7. **Keep the recommender posted about the outcome.**

Recommendation letters are very time consuming, and the recommender is doing you a big favor. You don't have to write a hugely formal thank-you letter, but it's nice to provide a follow-up note, email, or phone call that lets the recommender know the final outcome—did you get in/get the job?