



5 Tips for a Quality Letter of Recommendation

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Letters of Recommendation provide valuable insights into a candidate. Recommenders offer first-hand testimony that complements a resumé, interview, or personal statement.

However, many people wonder if there is a secret to the 'right' letter. They struggle with knowing who to ask and what to ask for. Below, find five tips to secure quality letters of recommendation.

1) Not Who, But What

What is most important in a recommender is not who they are, but what they can say about you.

It may be tempting to ask a very senior or famous person to write a recommendation. However, names and titles do not impress if the author cannot speak knowledgeably about you and your experiences.

Find someone who will connect personal details about you to the place to which you are applying. Choose a recommender who can explain the impact or results of your work. Ask someone who can talk about how you have grown over time – and the ways in which you will continue to learn and grow in the position for which you are applying.

Avoid asking family or friends. It is unlikely they will provide a letter with unbiased credibility.

If you have to submit letters from people with specific roles (ex: an academic reference or a professional reference), follow directions!

2) Guide the Writer

A quality recommendation educates the reader using the author's personal experience. To do that effectively, most writers need guidance.

Remind recommenders about projects you worked on together; don't assume they will remember on their own. Provide dates, details, and descriptions of the work you completed or interactions you had with the recommender.

Think about how the school or employer describes itself (ex: a quantitative-heavy program or an employer focused on social justice). Read the About Us or History sections of their websites for keywords. Share those details with your recommender and ask them to use similar language in your letter (when applicable) to draw connections between you and the organization.

Don't forget to remind recommenders (repeatedly) about deadlines. They will not be as focused as you are on when things are due.

3) Understand the Readers' Needs

Think about what the reader needs to learn from a recommendation letter.

In a professional setting, employers might want to understand your desire to contribute to their mission, what you are like to work with, or how you can fulfill the responsibilities of the position. In an academic context, schools could seek to understand your capacity for academic success, how their program fits into your broad professional goals, or ways in which you can contribute something distinctive to their learning environment.



Readers should find information that is complementary to the other sources they have, such as your resumé, personal statements, or LinkedIn profile. Recommendations should provide personal insights from those who have interacted with you over a period of time - a perspective beyond what someone will gain in a brief interview.

Ideally, your recommendations should make it easy for the reader to see why you are a fit.

4) Avoid the Hype

Your recommender should be unabashed in their support. They should sing your praises, celebrating what you have done and are capable of doing.

At the same time, absurdist or pie-in-the-sky comparisons undercut the validity of the comments they make.

Encourage recommenders to ground their praise in specifics. For example, noting that you were the only student to earn an A in class clearly demonstrates your capabilities compared to others. By contrast, saying you are “in the top .01% of every student they have ever taught,” gives no reference point; it does not help readers understand what you can do.

You may not be able to control what your recommenders write. However, encourage them to use clear details. The more information you provide, the more likely a recommender can give a realistic assessment of your strengths.

5) Keep Relationships Alive

As outlined above, quality letters of recommendation depend on your relationships with the author.

Think about the faculty or supervisors with whom you have strong relationships. Be sure to stay in touch with them after you complete their class or move on to new positions.

Set a calendar reminder to check in regularly and catch up, perhaps once a year. If you see their favorite performer, sports team, or travel destination in the news, email them the story. Share articles related to their work. These prompts show that you remember their interests and are thinking of them. They also keep the lines of communication open, so that they can stay up to date on you.

If it has been some time since you spoke with a professor or supervisor, seek to reestablish connections before you ask for the recommendation. Refresh their memories with examples of projects you worked on, where you sat in class, a memorable trait of yours, or other clues. Then, ask for a call or another way to update them on your work and life.

Recommendations showcase your fit for an opportunity. Simple things can help make sure you submit quality letters.