

Letter of recommendation guidelines

(hat tip to Nuno Monteiro, from whom these guidelines were borrowed)

Please read this before you ask me for a letter. Here are a few guidelines to determine:

1. Whether I will write you a recommendation letter; and
2. What I need from you in case I write a letter for you

Will I write you a recommendation letter?

If you ask me for a recommendation letter, there are three possible outcomes:

1. First, if I know you well; if you have taken one or more courses with me, preferably including at least one seminar; if I have supervised your senior thesis; or if you have otherwise interacted with me in any other capacity that enables me to assess your intellectual potential; then I will be delighted to write you a letter, and I will write you a strong letter, which will probably be a plus in your application.
2. Second, if I don't know you at all; if you have never taken a course with me; if we have never interacted in any capacity that enables me to assess your potential; then I will not write a letter for you because I could not write a strong letter, and a weak letter has a high opportunity cost (for both of us) and may end up hurting your application.
3. Third, and this is the murky case, if we have interacted somewhat; if you have, for instance, taken a lecture course with me, but we never really met; or if we have talked briefly once but I cannot in any way assess your potential other than the grade you got on that course; then I will be willing to write you a letter but you should understand that my letter will not be particularly strong and will therefore probably not be a plus in your application.

The best recommendations come from faculty in courses where you have performed well. They also come from teachers who have worked closely with you: supervising a paper, exchanging ideas in a seminar, or holding discussions during office hours. (This is why it is important that you develop a strong working relationship with one or more faculty during your college years). In case you are in situation three, I strongly suggest that you try to get someone who knows you better to write a letter for you, but I may be willing to write you a letter, with the caveat above, if you can't find anyone else.

What do I need from you

First of all, time. If you want a letter from me, please ask at least three weeks before the deadline by which the letter will be due. More is better. This is crucial during "letter season" (i.e., from

October to February), when everyone you know is applying for fellowships and/or to grad or law school.

Once I have agreed to write a letter for you, I will need the following from you in one single package (email attachments are OK) at least two weeks before the deadline:

Your Curriculum Vitae or resume

Unofficial versions of your transcripts (including GPAs) and any standardized test scores relevant for the application at hand

A list of institutions or organizations to which you want the letter to be sent, including the deadline by which each letter has to be in and any specific instructions provided for letter writers. In case the letter is for a job or internship, send me a description of the position. I need to know what I am recommending you for

Other relevant materials included in your application, such as your statement of purpose or research

A list of bullet points about our previous interaction that you think are germane to the application, this is particularly useful if our interaction was in the distant past, i.e., more than a year ago

Note:

Whenever there is a form, online or on paper, that must accompany the letter, do fill in as much of my personal information (position, department, contacts, etc.) as possible