

Letters of Recommendation

What is a letter of recommendation?

A letter of recommendation is a letter in which a writer evaluates the skills, work habits, and achievements of an individual applying for a job, admission into a graduate school, or some other professional position. Letters of recommendation can also be requested for scholarships, research, or internships. For the purpose of this document the focus will be on letter of recommendation intended for graduate school applications. However, the information is still applicable to some of these other uses.

Why do you need a letter of recommendation?

Letters of recommendation are a powerful tool in applications and in demonstrating the kind of person, student, and/or professional you are. It allows an admissions committee a better insight into you before making their decision on whether or not they want you in their program. Most of the people making the decisions do not know you personally, but your letter writers do, and their letters will help bridge the disconnect between you and the committee. This is why choosing letter writers who know you well is so important. Writers who are more familiar with the kind of individual you are will likely write stronger and more personal letters, which will be better tools to support your application with.

What might be included in a letter of recommendation?

Letters of recommendation can include personal, academic, and professional achievements. They can highlight personality traits, skills, and/or mannerisms that are relevant to you or the application. They can include anecdotes and experiences that illustrate the kind of individual you are. It can also include critiques of all the previous things as well, showing more depth than just praise.

How should you ask for a letter of recommendation?

You should request letters of recommendation as personally as possible. This is a huge favor you are asking of another individual, and the more personal and sincere you are, the more effort and sincerity they are likely to put into writing your letter. Asking in person is the best way to request a letter. You may need to make an appointment to do this, but do the actual requesting of the letter during your appointment. The more you can connect with your writers, the more they will have to work with when writing your letter.

You should be prepared to give them materials to help them write their letters as well. Providing transcripts, personal statement, a resume or CV, volunteer experience, awards and scholarships, publication and presentations, etc. can be helpful to writers. It may be worthwhile to chat during the meeting about goals, progress, current projects, etc. The more personable you are, the more they will remember you.

It is also important to discuss the ISU Pre-Health Advising cover sheet with them during your request. This cover sheet is an important part of your letter process, and should be brought up to ensure

that a cover sheet can be sent in with the letter they write. You may want to review the cover sheet with them, as it contains important information regarding the letter writing process.

You should also provide your letter writers with a preemptive deadline, meaning your letter writers should know when you need your letters submitted from the very start. This will allow them to better schedule and plan, meaning they won't have to rush to put a letter together right before the deadline. You should be sure to request the letter well before the deadline as well. The letter needs to be written, sent, received, and processed before the deadline. Make sure you plan out and request letters with enough time for that whole process to occur.

Who should you ask for a letter of recommendation?

There are a number of different people you can ask for a letter of recommendation. Some programs or schools may specify the kind of letter writers you need, such as a letter from a science professor, health professional, personal reference, etc. One of the most important things to take into consideration when choosing letter writers is how well they know you. Letters that are written by individuals who know you better will be stronger, more personal and more persuasive than letters written by someone who has only met you once or twice.

This is one reason why getting to know professors, professionals, and other individuals is so critical for letters of recommendation. Making these connections will allow you to request letters from people who have truly had time to get to know you. Individuals who know you well will be more inclined to write a letter for you, and more specifically take the time to write a strong letter that will help you accomplish your goals. Good letters require effort on your part as much as it requires effort on the writer's part.

When should you ask for a letter of recommendation?

You should be thinking about individuals who you would like to write you a letter of recommendation as an ongoing process. This will make it easier on you when you need to start requesting letters. You will have already put in time and effort into choosing and building relationships making the whole process run more smoothly.

Three to six months before your application is due is the recommended time frame for requesting letters from your preferred writers. This will provide time for the requests as well as for the rest of the process. Earlier is better, that way the process is not as rushed, but make sure you are being mindful while you are being punctual.

Should I follow up with my letter writers?

You should follow up with your letter writers at different times during the process.

Soon after requesting a letter, and them accepting that request, you should reach out and thank them. They have agreed to support you through an extremely important part of your application, and you should not take that lightly. Make sure that they have all the materials they need from you to ensure a smooth writing experience. If they request additional information, provide it promptly.

Starting about three weeks before the letter's deadline, begin checking in with your letter writers to see if the letter has arrived at its destination. At this point in time, weekly check-ins are the

recommended time frame. If the letter still has not been received a week before the deadline, make sure the letter writer has all the information needed for uploading or sending the letter, and restate the deadline clearly. Be prepared to send them whatever they need.

Other important notes

Make sure you have alternate letter writers in mind. As disappointing as it might be, one of your preferred writers may not be able to write a letter for you. It is better to be prepared with an alternate than not know what to do or who to ask.

Ask your letter writers to give you one of their business cards! Their business card likely contains all their contact information, their title and credentials, and other important information you may need later.

Make sure you are consulting with your pre-health advisor during this process. They know what the letter of recommendation process should look like and can help you determine the best individuals to ask for letters. They can also help you determine the way your letters will be submitted. Letters can be submitted individually, or as a packet. This is one of the reasons that cover sheets are so critical to the letter process. Make sure you are communicating with your advisor to determine the best way for you to submit your letters!

Remember that you are asking for a lot of time and effort from your letter writers. Remain respectful and kind throughout the process, and make sure to express your appreciation for their time and support. Most letter writers are more than happy to support you in this step of your journey, but they still deserve recognition and appreciation.