Letters of Recommendation: Helpful tips that can make a difference!

Letters of recommendation are an integral part of your academic career if you are considering graduate or professional school. Letters typically identify and give examples of your outstanding key qualities and strengths, other special abilities, and your commitment and potential for contributing to a specific field of study or career area.

Who to ask?
You want to have strong, well-written letters of recommendation because they are a primary selection tool. Graduate and professional school admissions committees rely on them. Therefore:
- Letters of recommendation should be written by people who know you well from work, internship, student organization, volunteer, or classroom experiences. Co-workers, supervisors, or faculty members are good choices. Family members are generally not the most appropriate recommenders.
- Approach people who you think will give you positive, “glowing” recommendations. Ask up front if s/he can give you a strong recommendation.
- Have letters written for you now when people are most familiar with your strengths/abilities and remember you easily.

Great is better than good
If someone you approach lets you know his/her recommendation would not be favorable, thank them anyway and choose someone else. Three detailed, excellent letters are far better than five or six vague, cautiously-worded ones. Admissions committees specifically look for the difference between “glowing” and mediocre praise.

Make it easy!
Remember, your letter writers have classes to teach and many other students for whom to write recommendations. Therefore, do everything you can to make this a simple process for them. Give them:
- relevant information about the school(s)/program(s) to which you are applying
- your thoughts on what you see as your strong qualities and skills
- a copy of your current resume and/or a printed summary of your involvement in student organizations and groups
- a list highlighting any coursework you’ve completed with them and how you did
- a copy of our tips for evaluators
- a sample of one of your personal statements (essays)
* Put these materials in a packet with a stamped envelope with the address already printed on it.

Details count
Letters of recommendation should be word-processed and printed on the writer’s letterhead. It might be helpful for letter writers to include in their letter your social security number to help identify you properly.

Follow-up
It’s your responsibility to see that your letter writers follow through and send their letters. Remember, your application and deadlines are uppermost in your mind, but not necessarily in your recommenders’ minds. We suggest you set a false deadline 4 weeks ahead of your official due date to have your letters mailed out. Give them a couple of reminders if necessary. Take responsibility for the application process.

Thank them!
Writing effective, excellent letters of recommendation takes significant time, so be sure to thank your recommenders!
- Thank them in person AND thank them in writing
- Keep them informed about your application process. Let them know how things turned out for you and what your plans for the future are!

The Career and Community Learning Center can help. Please feel free to call or e-mail us with any questions you may have!