

How To Ask For Letters of Recommendation

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Corporations and professional schools, including graduate school applications, typically ask potential candidates for letters of recommendation, or letters of reference. Academic staff who have worked closely with students usually have a better perspective than most to provide such an audience with some constructive information about the candidate's potential. Here are some guidelines for students who would like to ask me for a supportive letter.

There is no clause in my contract that states I am required to provide a student with a letter of recommendation, so please don't assume that I'll write you a letter just because you were in my 200-level philosophy paper three years ago. Please treat your asking me for a letter as an invitation for an honest opinion about your work and about your potential as a professional or as a graduate student.

A letter of recommendation is just that, a recommendation, and if I'm unwilling to give you such an endorsement, I'll let you know. Don't take it personally, it's just that some situations don't call for a letter from me – I'm a scholar and my comfort zone is amongst other scholars. Just as I'd find it odd to read a letter of recommendation endorsing a possible postgraduate from a car mechanic or industry leader, I'm sure a business leader or car mechanic would find it odd to receive a letter of recommendation from me – then again, they might find it daunting to read.

I have been very successful at placing undergraduate students in top-tier professional graduate programs, in Philosophy, in Law, and in Medicine. If students would like for me to write them a letter of recommendation in partial support for admission to graduate study, then it is incumbent upon them to provide me with some informative material. Tell me why you're applying to the programs you're choosing and tell me why you believe I am well-placed to write you a letter of recommendation. For this second point, at the very least, you should probably remind me of the writing project you completed for my class. More than likely, however, you should provide me with the personal statement, project description, or writing sample you're going to submit with

your application. Doing this will place me well for writing you a positive letter of recommendation.