

Letters of Recommendation: the 5 Ws

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Why you may need a letter

Your reason: you are probably applying for

- a job or an internship
- graduate school
- a scholarship, fellowship, grant
- ...

Their reason: seeking info that can't be gleaned from a transcript/CV, e.g.

- writing/communication skills
- interpersonal skills
- organizational skills
- work ethic, timeliness
- enthusiasm
- curiosity
- creativity
- research abilities (for grad school)
- ...

What makes a good letter?

An unequivocal statement of strong support, citing concrete details, e.g.

- memories of interactions with you inside/outside of class
- broader context of the program/course
- remarks on the scope, quality, creativity, etc. of your work
- how you rank relative to other students
- your experience doing independent study/research with the professor

Not all of these details are necessary, but the more the better.

Understand: we aim to write positive letters. Letters are therefore read as much by what they *omit* as by what they actually say.

“Imagine writing ten letters about ten identical bottles of milk, and you have to somehow make the letters distinctive and interesting.” — one of Brent’s undergraduate professors (this did not help Brent’s stress level...)

Whom to ask to write for you

Ask someone who knows you well and thinks highly of you. For grad students, a letter from the thesis advisor is *expected*. For applications to grad school, a letter from a professor will typically carry more weight.

Good reasons:

- you did well in their course *and actively participated*, e.g. asking questions, attending office hours, etc.
- maybe their course was small, with a final project which allowed you to have a few conversations with the instructor (hence they know your work better than from simply grading an assignment).
- you did independent work under their supervision: MATH 470/480, USRA/SURA, etc.
- you participated in their extracurricular activity (seminars, outreach, info events) or were a marker or TEAM mentor for their course.
- you overcame some adversity to succeed, which they can address

Note: do these things because you are interested, not to “pad your CV” or to “get a good reference letter” (we can usually tell!)

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Insufficient reasons:

- you got a good grade in their course
- you enjoyed their course
- you think they are nice
- you think they are a great teacher
- you think they are a famous researcher
- someone you know got a letter from them
- they once waved to you in the hallway

“We are often asked to say if the student was the best of all students we have known, in the top 5% of students we have known, the best in this course...” — one of Rosalie’s undergraduate professors who had taught her three courses (Rosalie went and asked someone else for a letter)

When and how to ask

Ask **well in advance**, ideally at least a month. We suggest a concise (2-3 paragraph) email with the following:

- Subject line: “Request for recommendation letter” or similar
- “Dear Professor [Surname]” unless already on a first name basis.
- How you know them (unless it is obvious)
- What you are applying for
- The deadline(s)
- (Offer to) attach your CV, transcript, any other application materials (personal statement, list of places you are applying to, etc.)
- If taking a gap year or applying in a year or more, consider asking now.

You should **not**:

- attempt flattery, quid pro quo, etc.
- start your email with “Hey!”
- give your whole life story

The reply...

If their response is luke-warm, hesitant, or says they can't write much more than what is in your transcript, it means their letter may not be very strong, and you might think about finding another letter writer.

If the answer is yes:

- Send more details (CV etc. as mentioned before, but also details on what the program or employer is looking for); consult the web site to confirm the writer's deadline, which may be different from yours.
- Remind your letter writer maybe a week or a few days before the deadline (or whenever they suggested you do so).
- Confidentiality is very important, so don't ask to see the letter, draft the letter, etc. Waive the right to see it, if asked by the recipient.
- A brief note of thanks once the letters are all submitted is always appreciated. Anything further (gifts, offers to help, etc.) is unnecessary/inappropriate.
- Follow up to let the professor know the results of your applications, whatever they may be. We want to know!

Further resources

Links to further advice, templates, etc., can be found under “Recommendation Letters” here:

[https://www.mcgill.ca/mathstat/eosw/
resources-undergraduate-students-0/academicemployment](https://www.mcgill.ca/mathstat/eosw/resources-undergraduate-students-0/academicemployment)