

Etiquette for Requesting Letters of Recommendation

This is the time of year when students are looking for a summer job, or applying for college admission and scholarships. Often, students are asked to provide a letter of reference or recommendation.

Students (and parents!) probably don't realize how much time these can take. A letter of recommendation can be like writing an essay, often taking over an hour to draft. Stamps and envelopes don't cost that much, unless you are sending out lots of letters. A call from a prospective employer or college admission counselor can take five minutes... or over an hour. Most instructors report that few students say thank you for the time and effort it takes, and even fewer write a thank you note.

So, here are my guidelines for requests of recommendation/reference:

1. First and foremost, the request must come from the student.

- Parents, you need to teach your sons and daughters to make that request themselves and teach them to do it properly. If your student is shy or reluctant to ask, try role-playing it. Empower them, but don't do it for them.

While it is good that you as parents have this information too, I am addressing these guidelines to the student.

- An important part of the process is the conversation between the student and the person writing the letter of recommendation. What is the job? Where are you applying? Why did you choose that job/school? The answers these questions help the instructor write a personalized and focused letter.

2. Follow instructions

- It is important that you are clear as to what you are asking of the writer.
- Check to see if you need a character reference or an academic reference because they are quite different.
- In the case of a job, you should understand how the potential employer will be contacting your reference (phone, email, letter, etc.) and what they will be asking from them (a short phone conversation, a response to an email, a form filled out, etc.).
- In the case of a college letter of recommendation, does the college or scholarship agency want a "to whom it may concern" letter, a form filled out and mailed, or a response on a website where the writer has to setup an account?
- Typically, a college admission letter is a form letter where you fill your name and contact information at the top. It is important that you fill out that top portion before you give it to the writer. (I shouldn't have to find out your contact information, and if that is missing, it could delay the completion of your file.)

Personal comments:

I know some instructors who will not continue with the recommendation unless this waiver is signed.

I have heard that some schools do not take a recommendation as seriously from a student who will not waive their right to view the recommendation as from those who do sign the waiver

Personal comments:

If a parent asks me to write a letter, I will not say yes; I tell the parent to have the student call or email me to request a letter or to list me as a reference. I need to have that important conversation with the student.

I have also been surprised to have a college or potential employer contact me "out of the blue." In these cases, the student just "forgot" to tell me that they had used me as a reference. The surprise in my voice says volumes about the student.

- Also, this portion usually includes a waiver where you give up the right to see the recommendation. In this way, the author can confidentially write truthfully about you.

3. Choose carefully!

- Make sure that the person from whom you are asking for a character reference actually knows you well.
 - If you are asking for an academic reference, make sure you did well in that class or that the writer can actually speak to your academic success.

Personal comment:

I once had to say no to a student who asked for a letter of recommendation for his top college. It was difficult to do, but this very bright student often showed up late to my class, and was not timely or thorough with his assignments. I told him (kindly) I could not write a great letter. He understood, but was disappointed.

- Ask the person something like this: "Would you feel comfortable if I used you as a reference?" or, "Based on the work I did in your class, can you recommend me for college work?"

4. Communicate expectations

- Tell the writer what kind of letter you need and communicate all directions.
- If there are specific instructions or a job/scholarship description, make sure to give them to the writer.
- Give him or her plenty of time to write the letter, but be very

clear about the deadline. In fact, give them a deadline a full week before the application is due.

5. Ask the writer if s/he needs more information

- If you have an activities resume, email a copy or list out your activities.
 - If s/he wants to know your GPA, let them know that as well.

Personal comment:

It is much easier to write a letter or provide a reference when I am knowledgeable about the student's activities outside of my class. This is especially true for homeschoolers. When I worked as a high school counselor, I usually knew what the students were involved in, but I don't necessarily know this about my home educated students.

6. Provide an addressed stamped envelope.

7. A hand written thank you note is essential!

- Remember that the writer is doing YOU a favor, so say thank you and follow up with that thank you note.
- A \$50 gift certificate or expensive gift could be construed as bribery; this is never expected, nor appropriate!
- However, a homemade goody, a letter saying how much you learned from that person or a \$5 coffee certificate would be much appreciated.

Personal comment:

I have had parents and students call me in a panic because the deadline was that day and they need that letter of recommendation and they forgot to ask, and can I please write something and they will drive 30 miles to pick it up and then drive another 20 miles to take it to the college and they have to make it there before 5:00 when they close... and believe it or not, this has actually happened more than once!

8. Give feedback

- Did you get the job?
- Did you get into the college?
- Did you earn the scholarship?

Personal comment:

I teach a class to home educated students about college and jobs and I explain the importance of thank you notes, so I get more thank you notes than most other teachers!

Personal comment:

Students, let us know the results. We want to congratulate you or empathize with you.