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STUDENT GUIDE TO LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

What are letters of recommendation?

During your undergraduate career, as well as after you graduate, you will need letters of recommendation from people who know you well. Prospective employers, graduate institutions and scholarship foundations will usually ask for 2-3 letters to support your application. It is of utmost important to establish relationships with teachers and mentors qualified to comment on your academic accomplishments, work habits, personality, and likelihood of succeeding at the endeavor you are proposing. Depending on the application, your recommenders may be professors or staff at Williams, supervisors at your part-time job, summer internship, or community service activity. Your recommenders will also be asked to comment on the capacity in which they know you, and how long they have known you; obviously, their recommendations will be taken more seriously if they can show that they know you well.

When should you ask for a letter of recommendation?

Even if you are not planning to apply for anything just yet, you should always keep an eye out for suitable recommenders. You may want to ask a supervisor at the end of a successful internship, or a professor in whose class you did well, whether they would be willing to write a letter on your behalf should you need one.

In general, you should give your recommender fair notice when asking for letters of support. Not only is it good manners, but it will also allow him/her to compose a thoughtful letter that can effectively support your application. Asking early will also allow you to find another recommender if your first choice is busy, absent, or reluctant to recommend you.

How should you ask for letters of recommendation from professors?

If you are on campus, you should make the request in person. That will allow the professor to ask you about your goals and plans, and will give you a chance to gauge the professor's willingness to write a positive letter. If you are off campus, you will need to make the request by phone or in writing. It may be a good idea, especially if it has been a few years since the professor has seen you, to attach a photograph of yourself to your request.

You should always ask your recommender if he or she would be willing to write a good (i.e. strong, supportive) letter on your behalf. Some people will agree to write letters only for students they know very well, or for students who did well in their classes. Some will not agree to write letters unless they have several weeks' notice, especially at busy times of the years. Most professors consider the writing of recommendations a part of their job, and not an undue imposition. Most understand the importance of supporting their students, and will

do their best to help you. (Should you decide not to follow through with your application, be sure to let your recommender know well in advance.)

How important is confidentiality?

It is generally a good idea to waive your rights to read letters written on your behalf. Recipients place more credence on confidential letters, and some programs require them. If you have doubts about the kind of letter the recommender plans to write, ask?

What kind of information will your recommender need?

You should provide the following in writing:

- The date the recommendation is due.
- Your current contact information, so that your recommender can reach you, if necessary.
- Stamps, address labels, envelopes, as necessary. (Some recommenders may prefer to use departmental stationery for all their correspondence.)
- Any relevant forms (including waiver forms) provided by the organization properly filled out (if applicable).
- The name, title, organization, and address of the person to whom the address should be addressed.
- For electronic letters, any relevant links and/or instructions on submitting the letter.
- The address to which it should be sent. Some organizations require that recommendation letters be sent in hard copy in sealed and signed envelopes together with the rest of your application. Others want letters to be mailed directly by the recommender. Make sure you follow all directions, and inform your recommender accordingly.
- Information about the position/scholarship/graduate program to which you are applying.
- A brief description of your goals and plans. Your resume, if you have one, transcripts, if relevant, and any information you would like the recommender to address in his/her letter.
- A draft of your personal statement or research proposal, if such is required for your application.
- A reminder of how you and your recommender know one another; classes you have taken with him/her, what grades you got in those classes, paper topics you worked on, etc. You may wish to include a copy of a successful paper or final exam, and any commendation your professor gave you on your work.

Should you follow up?

You should always check in with your recommender several days before the letter is due. Sometimes even the most organized and conscientious recommendation writer will appreciate a reminder. A thank you note is always in order when someone writes a letter on your behalf. (Gifts are not necessary, and often considered inappropriate.) Be sure to inform the recommender about the outcome of your application.