

# Recommendation Letters

## Tips for the Student

- I. Choosing References
  - A. It is important to choose someone who will be credible...not only by name/position held but also by what they write about you, their thoroughness, and their ability to write and articulate well
  - B. First, create a list of all previous supervisors, faculty members, and school officials who know you
  - C. Next, create a list of all prominent people you know (city/state leaders, university president, etc.)
  - D. Select those from your lists that would be willing to give you a recommendation letter or that know you well enough to write more than a generic letter, ensuring that those people fit the criteria of recommenders requested by the organization/employer/graduate school
  - E. When you approach these people to ask for a recommendation, be sure to do the following
    1. Ask them, not only if they would be a reference for you, but also if they would be able to be a good/strong reference for you (and, if at ALL possible, ask for a reference in person...not via email or the telephone)
    2. Make sure you specify what type of a recommendation you need from them...verbal over the phone, write a letter, complete a form, etc. and when you need it (generally, you want to give references at least two weeks if they have to write a letter)
    3. Provide them with enough information about the position/employer/school that they can fit the letter to that if desired (including name of person to address letter to and address for mailing)
    4. Provide enough information about yourself (e.g. a complete résumé, possibly transcripts, or a copy of the application) so they can 'sell' you, particularly if they only know one facet of you/your work...and be sure to tell them if there is a particular strength you want included
- II. Waiving your Rights
  - A. On forms, you will usually have the option to waive your rights...while doing so takes away the certainty of knowing what your recommender says about you, it may be your best option
  - B. Some recommenders will not complete a reference unless you waive your right to see it while others may even provide you with a copy of the letter
  - C. Often, reviewers see your recommendation as more credible if you have waived your right to see it (they know that the high marks you received are because the reference thought you deserved them rather than that he/she was worried about hurting your feelings)
- III. Thanking your References
  - A. If you ever hope to receive a recommendation from your reference again, be sure to thank them by hand-writing and mailing a note of appreciation
  - B. Do not use the excuse of being 'too busy'...your reference could easily have used the same excuse
  - C. Good recommenders spend time to individualize letters. This may take an hour or more, so you should always take the 20 minutes to hand-write a thank you in return. If possible, recommenders also appreciate knowing whether or not you were accepted

## Tips for the Recommender

- I. Gaining Credibility
  - A. Letters are always a reflection of the recommender...since the reader will not know you, it is vital that you establish credibility in the opening paragraph
  - B. Use a self-introduction which includes your relationship with the applicant, and use organizational letterhead, if relevant
- II. Content
  - A. Neither letters that include just one issue – nor those that include too many – will be viewed favorably by the reviewer...two or three qualities, with concrete examples, usually suffice
  - B. For maximum benefit, make sure your letters are candid but positive and that they include descriptive examples or stories...rank/quantify the candidate vs. others if possible
  - C. Include an explicit statement regarding the candidate's attributes in your final overall evaluation
  - D. To close the letter, include your contact information and concluding congenial remarks
- III. Length and Miscellaneous Tips
  - A. While there generally is no established length for letters of recommendation, they are usually one-page long (but not longer than two pages)
  - B. If a candidate has asked you to complete a form, it is usually preferable that the forms are typed...if that is not possible, please ensure that they are, at minimum, legibly readable
  - C. Attaching additional information is almost always acceptable if there is insufficient space on the form for your comments