Letters of Recommendation

There are many times throughout your career where you will need a letter of recommendation or a professional reference. Begin early in your college career to establish relationships with your faculty members and supervisors and spend time cultivating them; doing so is what leads to strong letters of recommendation.

Get to know your faculty members and let them get to know you well enough so they can write a specific, detailed letter that speaks to your accomplishments and your potential for graduate study. There are various ways you can build a relationship with faculty members. You might take them for a cup of coffee, attend office hours or attend one of their research talks. As you spend time with them...

- Talk with them about your areas of interest and future aspirations.
- Ask them about their research.
- Take more than one course from a faculty member whose work closely aligns with yours.
- Consider conducting research with a faculty member.

Request letters of recommendation at least a month in advance of the deadline, preferably 2-3 months in advance of the deadline. You can send a reminder to the letter writer closer to the deadline. They won’t see this as nagging, but rather helpful with their busy schedule.

Request letters from only faculty members when applying for off-campus study, graduate study or an academic fellowship. For these opportunities, letters from colleagues or employers should be requested in the very rare case when your proposed study is extremely well aligned with your work with these individuals. Note that these letters will not be seen as strong as letters from faculty members who are familiar with your work.

Request letters from a combination of supervisors and faculty members when applying for a work or internship opportunity. Employers often want to see recommendations from faculty members as well as supervisors for current students or recent graduates. These individuals should be able to speak specifically to the work you have done and connect it to your proposed work.

*Develop and maintain strong relationships with faculty and staff members, who can write letters of recommendation that detail your strengths and abilities.*
Establish a portfolio of your work. Keeping copies of your work, including graded papers and presentations, can be helpful in sharing with faculty members to refresh their recollection of your skills and abilities. Remember they teach hundreds of students, so they will not remember your particular work. Sharing your work with them helps them remember you and your abilities and gives them something concrete to refer to in the letter they write. Having this portfolio of work may also be useful if your graduate program or potential employer requires submission of a sample of your work.

Be professional in making the request for a letter, but don’t feel awkward about it. A significant role faculty members and former employers play, and want to play, is supporting their students to pursue further study. They are accustomed to writing letters of recommendation. That said, give them notice, be professional in your correspondence and interaction with them and provide them as much information as possible to help them write the letter. And be sure to share some information about your proposed program or activity, a draft of your statement of purpose or application and a copy of your resume so they have a full picture of what they are supporting you for.

If applying to graduate school, be proactive about gaps between when you graduate and when you apply to graduate school. The best letters of recommendation are from faculty who know you well. But because faculty members teach hundreds of students, it is harder for them to write strong letters the longer it has been since they worked with you in the classroom. If you have a gap of time between graduation and applying to graduate school, consider requesting letters of recommendation while you are still fresh in their memories and have them keep the letters on file, or consider a credentialing service (this can cost money) to house your letters. If the gap is significant (more than a few years), work hard to maintain relationships with your faculty members. If this isn’t possible, you might consider taking an upper level class in your discipline before you apply to graduate school to establish some more recent relationships with faculty members.

Send a thank you note and update them on your progress. A good reference writer will be interested in your success and will want to know the outcome. It will also help you the next time you might need a reference from that individual.