

Requesting Letters of Recommendation: Some Friendly Advice

Writing letters of recommendation is part of my job as a faculty member, and honestly, it's something I enjoy. I love seeing students succeed and supporting them as they work toward their goals. Since I often teach large classes, I get a lot of requests for letters every semester. I tend to give the same advice to everyone, so I created this document to help you get the strongest letter possible, if I'm able to write one for you.

The key takeaway: the more info you can give me, the better. And if I don't think I can write you a strong letter, I'll let you know right away so you can ask someone who might be a better fit.

Administrative Details

If you'd like me to write a letter for you, please get in touch as early as you can. Last-minute requests can't always be accommodated. Here's what I'll need:

- All relevant deadlines (please double-check them!)
- A link or copy of the program/job description you're applying to
- If there's an online form for submitting the letter, send me the link. If I'll be getting an email request instead, give me a heads-up on when to expect it and (if possible) what email address it will come from
- Clear instructions for submitting the letter—if you're not sure, ask the program or job contact for clarification
- Please **don't** list me as a reference unless we've talked about it and I've agreed to write the letter

Help Me Help You

The more I know about you and your application, the better I can write a letter that's personal and useful. At a minimum, I'll need:

- Your **statement of purpose/cover letter** and **CV/resume**—well in advance of the deadline
- A description of the opportunity you're applying for and your goals
- Any specific experiences, achievements, or skills you'd like me to highlight
- A quick reminder of our interactions: what class(es) you took with me, projects you worked on, etc.
 - Example: "I took your ASB 333 class and received an A" or "I worked in your lab helping with artifact analysis from the field school."

Feel free to send a bullet list of points you hope I can include in the letter—this is super helpful!

General Advice on Building Strong Letters

Having read many recommendation letters for grad programs, scholarships, and jobs, I've learned that the strongest ones are personal and detailed. A letter that says, "This student got an A in my class" is OK—but not great. A letter that says, "I worked closely with this

student during our field school where they showed strong leadership, attention to detail, and teamwork...”—that’s much more impactful.

So, if you’re planning ahead for grad school or the job market, think about how you’re building relationships with faculty or mentors who can really speak to your strengths. Here are some tips:

- Go to office hours to talk about your goals—not just class questions
 - Online students: make sure to take advantage of virtual office hours or set up meetings
- Take smaller, upper-division courses where professors get to know you better
- Get involved in [research apprenticeships](#) or internships for credit/pay (in person or online)
- Start a CV/resume early and keep updating it
- Keep a portfolio of your best work and hold on to things like transcripts, papers with feedback, and evidence of academic accomplishments

Staying Connected

I’ve written letters for students I taught more than a decade ago—but that only works because they stayed in touch. If you’re taking a break before applying for your next opportunity, check in occasionally with past professors or mentors.

In fields like archaeology (mine!), professional organizations like the **Arizona Archaeological Council** even have mentorship programs. These can be great for building connections outside the university.

And if your career plans shift, don’t hesitate to let us know—professors can often help point you toward new programs or jobs to explore.

Final Thoughts

Here’s the big question to ask yourself:

Can you name two or three professors who know your work well enough to talk about your skills, experiences, and potential, not just your grades?

If not, it’s time to start building those relationships. Having someone who truly knows and supports your work can make a huge difference, not just for one letter, but throughout your career.