

Requesting Letters of Recommendation

Writing letters of recommendation is part of my job as a faculty member, and it is something I am happy to do. Supporting students as they pursue graduate programs, scholarships, internships, and jobs is one of the most rewarding parts of my job.

Because I often teach large classes, I receive many requests for recommendation letters each semester. This guide outlines the information I need and offers some advice on how to obtain the strongest possible letter (not just from me, but from any faculty member or mentor).

The most important point is simple: **the more information you can provide, the stronger and more personalized your letter will be.** If I do not feel that I can write a strong letter on your behalf, I will let you know as soon as possible so that you have time to identify a better reference.

Administrative Details

If you would like me to write a letter of recommendation, please contact me as early as possible. Last-minute requests cannot always be accommodated.

Please provide the following information:

- All application deadlines (please verify them carefully).
- A link to, or copy of, the program, scholarship, internship, or job description.
- Instructions for submitting the letter.
- If the letter is submitted through an online portal, send me the submission link.
- If I will receive an email request, let me know approximately when to expect it and, if possible, the email address from which it will be sent.

Please do not list me as a reference until we have discussed it and I have agreed to write the letter.

Help Me Write a Strong Letter

The strongest recommendation letters are specific, detailed, and tailored to the opportunity. To help me do that, please send the following materials well before the deadline:

- Your current CV or résumé.
- Your statement of purpose, personal statement, or cover letter (if applicable).
- A brief description of the opportunity and your goals.

- Any skills, experiences, accomplishments, or qualities you would like highlighted.
- A reminder of how we know each other.

Examples might include:

- “I took your ASB 333 course and earned an A.”
- “I worked in your lab analyzing artifacts from the field school.”
- “I completed an independent research project under your supervision.”

A short bullet-point list of accomplishments or experiences you hope I can discuss is especially helpful.

What Makes a Strong Recommendation Letter?

Having read many recommendation letters for graduate admissions, scholarships, and employment opportunities, I have learned that the most effective letters go beyond grades and course performance. A letter that simply states that a student earned a high grade provides useful information, but it does not tell a committee much about the individual. Stronger letters describe specific examples of a student’s abilities, work ethic, leadership, problem-solving skills, research experience, or contributions to a project.

For example, a letter describing how a student demonstrated leadership during a field school, contributed to a research project, or showed exceptional initiative carries much greater weight than a letter that focuses solely on classroom performance. Because of this, students should think strategically about building relationships with faculty members and mentors who can speak to their strengths in meaningful ways.

Building Strong Relationships with Faculty and Mentors

If you anticipate applying to graduate school, scholarships, internships, or professional positions in the future, consider the following:

- Attend office hours and discuss your academic and career goals.
- Take advantage of virtual office hours or schedule meetings if you are an online student.
- Enroll in smaller, upper-division courses where faculty can get to know your work more closely.
- Participate in research projects, internships, field schools, or apprenticeships when possible.
- Maintain an up-to-date CV or résumé.
- Save examples of your strongest work, including papers, projects, presentations, transcripts, and feedback from instructors.

The goal is not simply to earn good grades, but to give potential letter writers opportunities to learn about your skills, interests, and accomplishments.

Staying Connected

I have written letters for students more than a decade after teaching them, but those requests were successful because the students stayed in touch. If you take time between graduation and your next opportunity, consider periodically updating former professors or mentors about your academic and professional progress. Maintaining those connections makes it much easier for someone to write a detailed and accurate recommendation later.

Professional organizations can also provide valuable networking and mentorship opportunities. In archaeology, for example, organizations such as the Arizona Archaeological Council offer mentorship programs that help students and early-career professionals build connections beyond the university.

If your goals change, let your mentors know. Faculty members can often suggest alternative programs, career paths, or professional opportunities that you may not have considered.

Final Thoughts

Before requesting letters of recommendation, ask yourself this question:

Can I identify two or three faculty members or mentors who know my work well enough to discuss my skills, experiences, accomplishments, and potential, not just my grades?

If the answer is no, start building those relationships now.

Strong recommendation letters come from people who have seen your work firsthand and can speak specifically about your abilities. Developing those professional relationships will benefit you not only when you need a letter, but throughout your academic and professional career.