

RECOMMENDATION LETTER ETIQUETTE

Guidelines for Requesting a Faculty Reference

Professors take the writing of recommendation letters very seriously, and they expect students to do the same. Recommendations reflect not just the quality of the student, but also the integrity of the professor and ultimately the university. Professors are obligated to be objective and specific about a student's fitness for a given position; if employers and graduate schools learn to distrust the praise from an SPU faculty member, it puts the entire university's reputation in jeopardy. And that damages the prospects of all SPU students seeking positions after graduation.

1. **Choose a faculty member who knows you well**, preferably in a variety of contexts. Employers and graduate schools read hundreds of reference letters, most of which are filled with generic praise. Specific reference letters are more likely to get noticed and appreciated. The more a professor/supervisor knows about you, the more specific the letter will be.
2. **Make a formal request of your professor** (by email or by appointment), asking if he or she would be willing to write a letter or fill out a form on your behalf. Explain the purpose of the recommendation and why you have chosen the professor. Give the professor time to consider your request.
3. **Ask early.** Make an appointment to discuss the recommendation *at least* three weeks in advance of the deadline—preferably a month or more, especially if you need multiple letters. Professors have very tight schedules and need ample time to write a thoughtful and distinctive letter.
4. **Provide information about the position.** The more professors know about the position or school you seek to enter, the more easily they can tailor the letter toward a specific audience. Bring the following materials to your appointment:
 - **A description of the job or graduate school(s)** to which you are applying. This requires some research on your part, and it will help you assess how suited you are to the position. If you are applying to multiple places, *bring all your reference requests at once.*
 - **The application forms and materials**, with the *deadlines clearly indicated* and the relevant portions filled in. If the application asks whether you waive (give up) your right to view the recommendation letter, we recommend that you agree to waive it, guaranteeing that the letter is candid and trustworthy. Letters for students who do not waive their right to view it are taken less seriously or ignored.
 - **A pre-addressed envelope with proper postage.**
5. **Provide information about yourself.** The more professors know about your past work, your extracurricular interests, and your aspirations, the more specific they can be about your talents and motivation. Bring the following materials to your appointment:

- **Graded papers or assignments** that you completed for the professor’s class. (Pick up your graded papers at the end of the quarter!) If you don’t have the graded assignments, print out a fresh copy. (Save your college assignments!)
 - **An updated resume** that highlights the experience and skills relevant to the position. Don’t limit your resume to academic pursuits—include extracurricular activities, job experience, and honors.
 - **A transcript.** This usually isn’t necessary, but some faculty may request it.
 - **A written description of your career interests and aspirations**—why are you applying to this position? If you are applying to graduate school, bring a draft of your “statement of purpose.”
 - **A list of other helpful details** about your work and experience with the professor.
 - **A list of your other references.** If the professor knows who else is writing a letter on your behalf, he or she can calibrate the letter to play up certain strengths that the other references may be less familiar with. You may request which qualities you would like each letter-writer to stress.
6. **Double-check that the letter has arrived by the deadline.** If not, contact the professor. (Letters are often lost in the mail or in the application shuffle).
 7. **Send the writer a thank-you note.** Faculty can spend several hours constructing a single letter; it’s nice to be acknowledged. And let us know whether you got the position!

COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

1. **Never assume** that the professor will be willing to write a letter. Always ask first, even if the professor has written a letter for you in the past. You should also ask for permission to list a professor’s name as a reference on an application, even if no letter is required.
2. **Don’t just drop off forms and info** with the office assistant or send them as email attachments—meet with the professor in person to discuss your qualifications, the requirements, and the deadlines.
3. **If a professor denies your request,** it may sting a little; but don’t assume this means you’re a bad student or bad person. Professors may have inadequate experience with you to write an effective letter, or they may have insufficient knowledge about the position or institution, or they may feel that your skills are better suited to different schools, positions, or career paths.
4. **Don’t harass professors** about whether they have sent the letter yet, unless they ask you to send a reminder. You may request that the professor send you an email to confirm that the letter is sent.