

Letters of Recommendation FAQ

Writing letters of recommendation for students who have been in my classes is an important and regular part of my job. Below are some requirements and guidelines you should be aware of so that our collaborative effort on your letter can be as productive as possible.

Will you write me a letter?

The qualifications I require in order to write a letter vary by the type of letter and the student. I judge each request on its merits, but what follows are guidelines for you to consider when deciding whether I am the right person for you to ask for a letter.

Letters for study abroad and semesters in Sacramento and DC are straightforward. I will write such a letter for most students who have enrolled in my class and done well. Of course, the better your work in the course, the stronger your letter will be. If you need a letter for law or professional school, I should be personally familiar with you. You should be a regular participant in classroom discussion or an active visitor to my office hours; ideally, both. If you would like a letter for a Ph.D. program, you should have done excellent work in my course, and I should be familiar with your intellectual rigor and creativity, and with your written and verbal skills from regular interactions in class and office hours. Also, we need to have an in-person discussion of your plans and options well in advance of letter-writing season.

How much time do you need?

3 weeks. For programs that require you to submit a personal statement, I need to have time to review your materials (see below) and, possibly, to get answers from you to questions or concerns I have about those materials. I may also request that you re-write your statement before I write the letter. With all of this in mind, you should plan to have all of the relevant materials in my hands three weeks before the letter is due. It's likely therefore that your request should come sooner. And, you should plan to be promptly responsive to e-mail throughout the time that I am writing you a letter.

What materials are required?

If I have agreed to write you a letter, please bring or send me all of the materials in support of your application at once, which must include:

1. A list of program(s) to which you're applying, noting deadlines.
2. Any specific requirements of the letter (for instance, if the program asks that letter writers specifically comment on a particular aspect of your application or eligibility).
3. Information on where I will need to submit the letter for each program that you apply to (this can come in the form of an automated email generated within your application, if that's an option that's available to you).

Your request can also include the following, if you think that giving me additional information could improve the quality of your letter:

4. A draft of your application materials (this can include a statement of purpose, proposal, or cover letter for the application(s) and a short resume of your extracurricular activities, achievements, and work history).
5. Photocopies of papers you've written for my class, including my comments (if available).
6. Anything else you think is relevant.

Please also note that you will also need to give me some indication that you have waived your rights under FERPA to view the letter. When a confidential letter of recommendation is an option, I will only write a letter for you if you choose to keep the letter between me and the admissions body confidential.