

Recommendation Letters for Undergraduate Students

Writing recommendation letters is an important part of a faculty job. Therefore, I am happy to support students in their search for the best academic program or job. However, recommendation letters are more effective if someone who knows your academic performance well writes them. I take the responsibility of writing letters quite seriously, as often these letters are written for jobs or to graduate schools with our colleagues with whom we have developed a reputation. Therefore, students who are considering asking me to be their letter writer should request a letter and take the application process with equal seriousness.

1. What's in a recommendation letter?

Letters of recommendation are typically written for internships, jobs, academic programs, and graduate school. Letters for graduate school usually tend to be a bit longer as they emphasize more aspects of one's application profile. A letter will typically address:

- How do I know the student and in what capacity?
- How would I rank the applicant to his/her cohort on various dimensions? How does the student compare to other students in top graduate programs? (for academic programs)
- Provide specific observations on key points (e.g., mathematical preparation for academic programs) or job requirements (for a job)
- Comment on specific attributes (e.g., independence, creativity, self-direction, work ethic, motivation, grit), which tend to be more salient for the particular job/academic program?
- Is the student a good fit? How strongly do I recommend the applicant?

2. Can I write you a letter?

I usually can write an effective and enthusiastic letter for students if:

- You took at least one course with me and you excelled (received an A or A-).
- Worked for me for a research project, some professional capacity, or I supervised an independent project/thesis.
- I know your academic/research/career interests well.

If none of these points holds, it will be very challenging for me to write a glowing letter that will be very helpful. A lukewarm generic letter can hurt much more than a stellar letter can help.

3. Items I Need Prior to Writing the Letter

If I agree to write you a letter, you should email me the following items, at least three weeks prior to the application deadline:

- Your latest resume/CV;
- Unofficial academic transcript(s);
- A writing sample (preferably from a social science course);
- Your personal statement to the programs you are applying to (if academic programs);
- A brief blurb (several coherent and well-written paragraphs) on why you think you will be an excellent fit for the program you are applying. The blurb can cover your strengths and weaknesses; specific examples from your work experience or academic courses on how specific personality traits will help you with the program/job you are applying for fits in your future aspirations. Be sure to highlight and discuss with specific examples from any past leadership and/or public service experience (I will only try to use this information to help you in drafting a more effective reference letter).
- A list of academic programs you are applying to (only for applicants to graduate programs). A simple Google Sheet (<https://www.google.com/sheets/about/>) accessible to you for edits and for me to view the list should suffice.