

**Guidelines for those requesting letters of recommendation**  
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So you are headed off to grad school, a fellowship, a job, or an academic position. Great! And you have lined up several faculty members who feel strongly enough about you and your talents to write recommendations for you. Again, great! But to get the best (and timeliest) recommendations possible, it will help to understand how the recommendation process looks from a faculty member's perspective. Here's the main thing: your advocates will likely have other recommendations due at the same time – since grad school deadlines and academic job deadlines all fall in the same period, a given advocate might be writing letters for 5, 10, or even more people. Multiply that number by the number of schools or jobs per person (4-8 schools, 5-30 or more jobs) and you get an idea of the scope of the organizational challenge. So, the main message is that the more you can do to make the process easier and less complicated for your advocate, the more likely it is that high-quality letters get to the right places at the right times.

**1) Give your letter writer a heads-up at least a month before the first letter is due.**

Most advocates will spend a considerable amount of time writing the first letter for you. Following that investment, later letters are modified from the first one to be specific to the positions to which you are applying. While a later letter still requires time, it is not nearly as time consuming as the first one. Therefore, lead time is most important before the *first* letter. For the (hopefully rare) occasions during your career when you mess up and need to ask an advocate for a letter at the last minute, ask one that has already written a letter for you during a previous cycle.

**2) Help your advocate write a great letter by giving them useful information.**

Information about your experience, interests, and training are all useful to your advocate as they try to create a picture of you on paper. Even if your advocate knows you extremely well, s/he may have forgotten about the time you taught physics to orangutans in Borneo, demonstrating both your interspecific pedagogical skills and your ability to tolerate body lice. A **resume or Curriculum Vitae** is essential. Other things that help (depending on the position):

For grad school: academic transcript, personal statement, fellowship proposals (especially the NSF predoctoral fellow proposal). Also, it is key to identify not only the school to which you are applying, but the **specific program** within the school (this allows your advocate to target their comments).

For academic jobs: statement of research interests, statement of teaching philosophy, abstracts of recent grant proposals, abstracts of papers if your advocate isn't terribly familiar with your previous work

**3) Limit your communications with your advocate to infrequent but data-rich bursts.** Imagine emailing your advocate a request for letters on day 1. On day 3, you email them your CV. Day 4, your transcripts. On Day 7, addresses for positions at schools A and B. On day 15, the address for school C. (This is close to an actual example). Now imagine your advocate going through weeks of email trying to piece

together the information needed to write your first letter. It's much better, after the initial communication in which your advocate agrees to write letters, to **send a single email** with the files attached that contain all the information needed. Check over everything to make sure all the info is complete and accurate. This will require extra organization, especially for those who terminally do things at the last minute; but don't you want your advocate to be impressed with how organized you are?

4) As a corollary to #3, **Make it easier for your letter writer to work on large batches of your letters, rather than requiring that each letter be handled individually on different days.** This may require that you submit your part of an application *earlier* than the deadline. For example, many grad schools only invite letter writers to submit their letters after the applicant has completed their part of the application. If you are applying to three schools and the deadlines for the letters are Dec. 1, Dec. 10, and Dec. 20, it would be supremely considerate if you completed the necessary steps for *all three* schools prior to Dec. 1, so that your advocate can submit all letters at the same time, say on Nov. 30. It wastes a lot of time if your advocate has to sit down on three separate occasions, find the relevant materials, and send out single letters. **In an ideal world, after writing your initial letter, your advocate could sit down and send out all your letters at once.** This more realistic for grad school applications than for academic job applications, as new job announcements come out on a rolling basis. However, whatever you can do to allow your advocate to work in batches will be appreciated.

5) For those institutions that require a paper (physical) letter to be mailed, it is considerate to provide your advocate with **stamped, pre-addressed envelopes.** In addition, many (but maybe not all – ask) advocates request that if there are particular forms that need to be filled out (e.g. rating sheets), **fill out everything that you can on the forms** (e.g. your name, your advocate's name, position, and address, phone numbers, etc.) – everything but your advocate's signature and the ratings themselves – to save your advocate time.