



NO. 62 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

## **Asking for Letters of Recommendation: How to Ask For and Manage the Letters You'll Need Now and Later**

It's never too soon to begin thinking about securing letters of recommendation from faculty members who have taught you in class or who know you through other means. You may need such letters as an undergraduate when you apply for scholarships, study abroad, internships, etc. You will definitely need them to apply to graduate or professional school when you leave Agnes Scott. Most faculty members keep these letters on hand and can update them later on as your needs change. Here are some important tips for securing these letters.

### **Faculty members want to recommend you!**

An important part of a faculty member's job is recommending students for graduate school, scholarships, jobs, etc. This is usually done by letter but can also be done over the telephone. Don't be nervous about asking for recommendations, but do think carefully about whom to ask and do provide all necessary materials well ahead of the due date.

### **Choosing your recommenders**

Choose faculty who know you well and who will have good things to say about you—teachers, research directors, employers, or advisors, for whom you did your best work or who saw you at moments of transformation or other kinds of achievement. Most faculty are willing to speak frankly about the type of recommendation they could write and may ask you what you want them to cover. Make sure the person you've chosen is willing to write an enthusiastic letter on your behalf. You may want to select an array of letter writers who can capture your best sides: for example, someone with whom you did research, someone for whom you worked as a student aide, someone who had you in class. The choice of recommenders depends, of course, on what you are applying for and how you want to represent yourself.

### **Ask in advance and in person**

Asking for a letter in person is more courteous and more useful since you and the faculty member can then discuss your plans and the letter's possible content. Try to give your recommenders at least one month notice regarding deadlines for recommendations—more time is also appreciated. When an opportunity comes up suddenly, faculty can sometimes manage to produce a letter for you, but again, try to give at least two weeks notice even in these exceptional cases.

### **Take good care of recommendation materials**

Don't leave recommendation materials outside or under office doors unless prearranged. Sometimes materials get lost when faculty don't know they are coming. Prearrange such drop-offs, and whether you mail, email or drop off the materials, check with the faculty member to make sure they were received.

### **Materials for the letter of recommendation**

Some faculty members have checklists for letters of recommendation; others need specific materials for certain types of letters. Ask each faculty member what he or she needs from you in order to write a letter, but be prepared to offer these items:

- a paragraph or two describing your connection with the faculty member with dates;
- a list of the courses you took with the recommender (with dates, e.g. "fall semester 2005"), the grades you received, titles of the projects or papers you did, etc.; include copies of your work if available;

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- a description of the program or scholarship or position for which you are applying;
- a list of the addresses to which recommendations should be mailed and a list of those offering or requiring online submission of letters (including links);
- any forms required for the recommendation;
- a current résumé;
- a copy of your statement of purpose, if required copies of papers you wrote (or other works produced) for each faculty member.

### **Stamped, addressed envelopes or not?**

It is not always necessary to provide stamped, addressed envelopes for the letters. Many faculty recommenders prefer to send recommendations in their own stationery envelopes. Ask each of your recommenders what they want you to do about envelopes.

### **To waive or not to waive: waive!**

Most graduate schools and scholarship programs require applicants to sign a form stating whether they do or do not waive access to the letter upon the completion of the application process. It is strongly recommended that students choose the “do waive” option, since confidential letters are usually viewed as more reliable.

### **Electronic references**

When the letter recommendation is to be turned in electronically (which is more and more the case these days), students should follow the same procedures as for letters sent by US Mail. Once you’ve submitted your faculty recommender’s name and email address to the online site, be sure to check to make sure he or she has received the email invitation with link, password, etc., as sometimes these get lost in SPAM filters.

### **Email reminders**

It is generally a good idea to send occasional email reminders to the faculty members who are writing letters for you. This is something you can arrange with each recommender when you present your materials.

### **Follow up with the institution to which you are applying**

Well before the deadline, be sure to check with the institution to which you applied to make sure all letters have been received. A reminder marked “urgent” to the faculty recommender may be necessary if the letter has not been received.

### **Thank-you notes and results**

A “thank you” note or email when the process is complete is always appreciated. You do NOT need to give thank-you gifts! Faculty members are eager to hear about acceptances (and rejections) and really appreciate hearing from you throughout your education, career, etc. Keep in touch!

### **Asking for recommendations more than once**

Once you have asked a faculty member for a letter, that letter will be on file and can be updated for later requests, so it is not usually a problem for a faculty member to provide letters on more than one occasion and at a later date. Provide a narrative of your more recent activities and accomplishments so that the letter can be updated appropriately.