

Asking for Faculty Letters of Recommendation

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Students in all class years frequently submit applications for internships, fellowships, scholarships, jobs, or graduate schools, and most of these applications require a letter of recommendation or a reference. As you consider reaching out to one of your International Studies professors, it's good to know some tips and tricks for making sure the process will be smooth.

I recently polled the IS faculty about their preferences regarding letters of recommendation. Every professor has different requirements, but **here are some of the general principles they shared** that should help you plan your applications.

First: Don't assume a professor will provide you with a letter.

Nearly all faculty surveyed said that they will only write letters for students they've had in class or who have worked with them in some other capacity (as a research assistant, for example, or perhaps as an advisee). Faculty receive many requests from many students, sometimes clustered around the same dates, so be sensitive to a professor's time constraints. Don't enter their name as a reference on an online application before you get their permission; all faculty surveyed said that they need to give permission before being listed as a letter writer or a reference.

Second: Make sure the professor would be a good reference for you.

The more positive interactions you have had with a professor, the better they are as a potential letter writer, because they know you and can write a detailed assessment. Many applications require faculty to list students' strengths and areas of improvement. Did you stand out in their class as a good participant, with good grades? Did you meet with them in office hours? Have you worked with them in another capacity, as an RA or part of a research group? Perhaps they are your thesis advisor. All of these things would make it more likely that the professor is a good reference for you.

If you are early in your academic career, you may not have had research positions or multiple classes with a professor -- and that's fine, as long as you've completed a course with them.

Third: Give faculty plenty of time, and be clear about what you need.

More than half of the faculty I surveyed said they need at least two weeks' notice to write a letter of recommendation, and some others said 3-4 weeks. **More lead time is always better.** If the professor has written letters for you in the past, they may need less lead time, but remember that each program or job may require a new or different letter, so be attentive to what's required of faculty.

Fourth: After they say yes, give them the information they need

After a professor has agreed to write the letter, send them clear instructions about what you're applying for and how to submit their letter.

- Include specific information on the organization and position or degree program to which you are applying.
- Include your **resume** (sometimes called a cv, or *curriculum vitae*) and application materials such as a **personal statement** that will help faculty understand how you are presenting yourself and why you want this position. It is always helpful to include some words on what parts of the work with that professor was most important in relation to this application.
- Offer to meet with the professor to discuss it, if that's helpful.
- When listing a faculty member as a reference, tell the organization to contact them by email (rather than phone) with any questions.

Final thoughts:

Faculty are eager to help students thrive, and we are very supportive of your applications, but each professor has different preferences and time limitations. It's part of our job to provide references for students, but we are not always able to say yes to every student who asks. It's your responsibility to make the process as easy as possible for faculty by being clear with what you need, and getting in touch well before something is due.