

Recommendations for requesting recommendations

By [Adam Ruben](#) | Jul. 25, 2018 , 1:20 PM

The science writing class I taught had ended for the day, and one of my students approached me. She was a bright pupil who always turned in good work, and she asked, hesitantly, whether I could write her a recommendation letter for a scholarship.

“Sure!” I said. “I’d be happy to!”

“Great!” she replied, shuffling papers, presumably the forms I’d need to fill out to accompany my letter. “But there’s, uh, one thing.”

“What is it?” I asked.

She handed me the papers and whispered, “The letter’s due kinda soon.”

Aha. Another student had waited until the last minute to solicit a recommendation letter, and now I’d have less time than usual to prepare it. A month is standard. Two weeks is pushing it. I supposed I could write her a letter within the week if I had to, but the rush job might compromise its quality.

“That’s OK,” I assured her, recalling how I, as a student, had certainly procrastinated my share of academic tasks. “So when’s it due?”

She looked at her watch and said, “90 minutes.”

You may be appalled to learn that I wrote the letter anyway. (As I wrote in [last month’s column](#) about writing recommendation letters, sometimes declining a request is the best option.) But had she instead asked a non-spineless professor, she likely would have been turned away with no letter.

That outcome, though less desirable in the short run, might have done a better job of enforcing one of the most important principles of asking for recommendation letters: Give sufficient warning. There is literally no downside to asking for a letter early. No professor has ever said, “Geez, these effing kids, always responsibly planning ahead. Also, I wish they’d land more Frisbees on my lawn.”

This is just one way you can improve your experience as a letter requester, not to mention the experience of those you are requesting letters from—which essentially means helping yourself, because an annoyed letter writer is an uncomplimentary letter writer. “Yeah,” your letter will say, “you should definitely give this little nimrod a job. Knock yourself out, pal.”

Here are some more tips for requesting recommendation letters to make the process as painless as possible for everyone involved:

Think carefully about whom to ask. You want your recommender to, you know, recommend you. So it’s not overly helpful to ask for a letter from someone whose class you sat in quietly, or whose seminar you once attended, or for whom you briefly cat-sat. These people may agree to write a letter, but will it really benefit your application to include a signed document attesting that you did indeed give Mittens the prescribed quantity of lams?

Be polite. You’re asking for a favor, not a birthright owed to you by the universe of academia. Do you know how much money people are paid to write these letters? None. So, please, say “please” and “thank you.” Thank you.

Take “no” for an answer. If a recommender declines to write a letter, they could be too busy, or it could be a polite hint that the letter would not be positive. Either way, you don’t want a letter from this person. A badgered recommender will not admire your persistence.

Help your recommender know what to highlight. The more information you can provide your recommender about what you’re applying for, the better. If you’re applying for a beekeeping internship, for example, and you need three recommendation letters, you may not find three people who can speak directly to your beekeeping prowess. But even if they can’t talk about how awesome you are at smoking a hive, you can give them enough information that they’ll know to emphasize your calmness, competence, and courage, which I assume are all qualities a beekeeper needs.

You may have to write the letter yourself. When seeking letters, I've had a couple of professors tell me, "Write it yourself, and I'll sign it." This request could be seen as an extension of the previous point: It's like giving them your CV plus telling them what to highlight. But I personally find this practice icky. The whole point of a recommendation is that an outsider's perspective has more value than self-assessment, and "write it yourself" undoes that value. Then there are the mechanics. It's awkward to write about oneself in the third person. I mean, to write about himself. I mean ... gah. If you find yourself needing to write your own letter, just do the best you can. Don't downplay your virtues, but don't boast about them in an unrealistic way. And if it helps, remember that lots of your colleagues are struggling to write their own recommendations, too.

Gentle nudging is OK. Everyone is busy, no one is perfect, and there's always a chance your recommender will forget to write the letter. If the due date is approaching and you're getting nervous, there's nothing wrong with a courteous reminder. Just, you know, keep it more like "Hi, just checking in" and less like "Hey, you turd, what's wrong with your stupid face?"

Gratitude is important—gratuity is not. As an undergraduate, I once asked a professor for a recommendation letter for grad school. She wrote the letter, handed it to me, and then said, "I really like *red wine*." I should have responded, "Well, I don't, because I'm 20." Instead, I found a way to procure the wine and gave it to her in a nice gift bag, and she seemed pleased. In retrospect, very little about that interaction was OK. Years later, I've had a couple of students give me gifts after I submitted their recommendation letters—including, randomly, a *Family Guy* DVD—but it's absolutely unnecessary. A simple "thank you" is plenty. Just don't skip the thank you.

For goodness sake, share the outcome with your recommender afterward. Did you get into that graduate program? Did you win the scholarship? Will you be studying zebra finches next year at the Sorbonne for that hypercompetitive fellowship, due in no small part to a glowing letter written by a kind mentor on your behalf? Let them know! Most of the students for whom I've written letters have disappeared into the ether, and the only way I'll ever know how the next phase of their career turned out is by looking them up on Facebook—which I don't do, because that's creepy.

The whole recommendation letter rigmarole reminds me of when I was a kid watching TV with my dad and an infomercial for an automotive touch-up paint called Color Match came on. A man with a mustache declared to the camera, apropos of nothing else, "Color Match really works!" That was the entirety of the scene: Open on mustached man, he says his line, cut to next shot. My dad snickered and then muttered sarcastically, "Yeah, you can take his word for it."

That was my first childhood lesson that a testimonial is only meaningful if it comes from someone with valid credentials and is based on arguments or data—not just an enthusiastic sentence from some schmo with a mustache.

Recommendation letters are the "Color Match really works!" of the science world. We request them, hoping they'll bolster our chances of career success. We write them, hoping we sound credible. We do all of this for an audience whose workday includes reading dozens, or maybe hundreds, of similar letters—which, after a while, must all sound a bit like variations on "Color Match really works!"

But those of you asking for recommendation letters can still increase the chance that they'll sound more convincing than a '90s infomercial. Just, uh, give us more than an hour and a half, OK?

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