How To Ask For A Letter Of Recommendation

In college and after, there will be many times when you are asked to provide a Letter of Recommendation. You may be applying for a scholarship, maybe there is an opportunity for a trip or study abroad, or it might be an internship. A Letter of Recommendation is simply a letter from a professor or teacher that is sent to a selection committee to say why he or she believes you are good choice.

It is normal to feel a little anxious about asking a professor for a Letter of Recommendation, but do not worry. Most professors do not mind at all and some are happy or even flattered to be asked. Also, if a professor says no it is more likely because he or she does not have the time to write or because they do not feel they know you well enough, than because of anything you did. So don't let it get to you. Simply thank them for their time and ask another professor. Just remember that that is not likely to happen, particularly if you ask properly. Just follow the steps below:

1) React!
As soon as you get the application form start thinking of who you should ask. The best people are those who know you well (i.e. your advisor or a teacher that you have had for a lot of classes.) If you cannot think of anyone, remember that the Director of the Honors Program will know you from HON 100 at least and is a good resource for a letter.

2) Ask!
Professors are very busy so you should ask right away and give him or her as much time as possible to write the letter. It is standard to give at least two weeks notice if you can. Try to set up a meeting with the professor so you can ask about it face to face. Do not be too shy or apologetic. It is part of a professor's job to write letters of recommendation for students. Be professional, tell the professor that you are applying for a particular scholarship or internship and that you would appreciate it if he or she would write you a letter of recommendation. It does not hurt to use a little flattery -- say that you remember their class, feel you learned a lot in it and that you did good work. If you cannot meet in person, you can ask via email, just remember to be polite and respectful.

3) Give the Info!
Make the letter polite and formal. Give them all the details you can including what it is for, where they should send the letter, and who the letter should be made out to. Sometimes it will be okay for them to give you the letter, but some scholarship applications will ask that the writer send the letter directly to the selection committee. Also it is important to include whether the letter should be "closed" or "open." A closed letter is one that you do not see. An open letter is one that you have access to and may read. It is conventional to choose a closed letter. It is either sent directly to the committee or sealed in an envelope. Because you do not have
access, means the person writing can be more honest. Be sure to include the date you need the letter by, and any information that will help him or her write the letter. This might include why you are applying for the scholarship or internship, why you think you would be a good choice, how it would help you academically or in your career.

4) Ask Everyone!
Sit down and make a list of everyone who could possibly write a letter for you. Ask the first couple people then move on down the list if one of them doesn’t respond or cannot write.

Applying for something over the summer is a whole new situation. You must allow for as much extra time as you possibly can because professors do not always check their emails or voicemails as regularly in the summer and it is often much harder to set up a face to face meeting.

Now for just a few more pieces of advice. Keep track of professors who have written letters for you in the past. It is likely that they will write for you again and it is much easier for them to write a second letter. It is also a very good idea to follow up with the professor; whether or not you got the scholarships. They would like to know how things went. Lastly, it is possible to ask one professor to write multiple letters at one time, however if you do this you should take extra care to make it as easy as possible for the professor. Provide him or her with as much information as you can about the different recipients. Even prepare a checklist to clarify things.

Just keep these things in mind as you go out and take advantage of all the opportunities college has to offer. **Good Luck!**

(By Emma Will, 8 August 2013)