How to Request Letters of Recommendation

When evaluating recommendations written on behalf of a prospective candidate, graduate programs, employers, and fellowship committees consider both the quality of a recommendation and the expertise of the evaluator. That’s why I’ve included the meme to the right: The best recommendations are detailed, well-considered assessments of your work by individuals who know you well and have developed a consistently favorable impression of your work.

1. **Be sure to ask permission from potential recommenders before having recommendation requests sent to them.** In fact, it’s best to discuss your intention to apply to graduate school well before the application deadline. For example, if you plan to submit applications in the fall, you should approach potential recommenders in the spring semester prior. You want to start conversations about graduate school (or fellowships) as early as possible, not only to ensure that your recommenders will have ample time to write a strong letter, but also to allow time for whatever creative discussions might result. Your professors will likely be able to give you advice about programs that are well-suited to your interests and might even have connections at universities, organizations, or companies to which you’ll be applying. Make the most of your network!

2. **Be professional.** Provide the following:
   - Submission instructions. Many programs will require you to enter your recommenders’ email addresses so that they can upload their recommendations to the application site. Be sure that you understand the guidelines so that you can keep your recommenders informed.
   - The recommendation form, if any, with your personal information typed in.
   - A resume, or list of achievements, including relevant courses you have taken, the names of instructors, and the grades that you’ve earned. The person who is using valuable time to recommend you should not be expected to research your records.
   - A brief narrative explaining the specifics of your work in your relevant classes and listing what skills you’ve learned or improved upon in my class. Be sure to explain how your work/skills are relevant to your current interest in attending graduate school or obtaining a certain kind of job.
   - Include copies of papers they have responded to and/or any other written feedback you’ve received from them.
   - Copies of the primary document(s), such as a Statement of Purpose, that you will be submitting to the selection committee.
   - A cover letter specifying the due date for the recommendation and where you can be reached if they have questions.

3. In addition to the above, you must observe decorum and common courtesy. Please keep in mind that in order to receive a recommendation, you must have done well in one or several courses taught by your recommender. If a letter is agreed to, it will honestly reflect your recommender’s opinion of you, your work, and your potential. It will be signed, sealed, and confidential. If a letter is denied, it is truly in your best interest and should not be taken personally.