

Requesting a Letter of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation from faculty members are essential for admission to some colleges (undergraduate, graduate and professional schools) and special programs, for scholarship applications, and to help you find employment in certain fields. Thanks to Dennis Fujita, Emeritus Professor from the SRJC Chemistry Department, here are some “how-to” tips for getting a letter of recommendation that will make a difference:

1. Choose carefully

Make sure that the instructor whom you ask to write a letter of recommendation really knows you. Earning a high grade in a class is not enough. Ask yourself if you took the time to form a relationship and if you “stood out” among your classmates. Did you make regular contact with this instructor to discuss ideas and concepts from the class or field of study? Did you share your academic and career goals with this faculty member? Was this instructor aware of your experiences and contributions beyond the classroom . . . to the field of study, to your community?

2. Put it in writing

Even if you are currently in regular contact with this faculty member, your request for a letter of recommendation should be in writing. This is particularly important if you have not seen this instructor for a semester or more. A written request allows you to set the stage for your letter of recommendation. Start with a description of who you are and what you are hoping to achieve with the letter of recommendation. Remind the instructor of which courses you took at the college (especially those that pertain to your field of interest) and how you performed, highlighting any special areas of achievement. Update the instructor by noting any honors you have received or work experience, community service, or leadership roles you have undertaken since you took his/her course. Include any forms that the instructor needs to fill out and/or any special guidelines that are requested by the institution requiring the letter.

3. Leave plenty of time

Make your request at least three weeks in advance. Faculty members have very tight schedules and it takes time to write a thoughtful and personal letter of recommendation. If you anticipate needing a letter or recommendation at a certain point in the academic year, begin early to talk to the instructor you hope will write the letter. A year in advance is not too soon to begin those conversations that help the instructor to know you.

4. Then ... let go

Provide the instructor with a stamped, pre-addressed (typed!), business envelope so that the letter can be mailed directly to the individual or committee responsible for selection. Do not expect that the instructor will provide you with a copy of this personal, confidential appraisal (although some may send you a copy). Having set the stage, it is important to trust the instructor to represent your interests well. You may want to double check with the instructor a week or so before the deadline to see if he or she needs any additional information. That is a good way to determine if the letter has been completed and is on its way to its destination.

Good Luck!