

How to Orchestrate Your Letters of Recommendation

At some point, everyone needs a letter of a recommendation – or three. During the throes of the application process, it's a bit late to start scrambling around to find a prof you didn't annoy by instant messaging through their class. Good letters are written long in advance. As the instructor for a large undergraduate class, I write 100+ recommendation letters per year, and serve on numerous Admissions and Fellowship Selection Committees, giving me the opportunity to read literally hundreds of recommendation letters per year. I have observed the following actions can deliver the best possible results. These guidelines allow the savvy student to orchestrate their recommender's efforts to best insure solid letters.

1. Get to know all of your professors. You cannot know in advance which faculty you'll need to ask for a letter of recommendation. Just assume every faculty member could write the key letter for your Medical School application. Of course, in large lecture settings, you only have limited opportunities for interaction, but you can still make an impression. Your goal in such large courses is differentiation without being annoying. Attend office hours, ask questions, and answer questions. Do whatever you can to make it clear you're thinking hard about the course material in a creative way. More convincing letters are written by faculty who teach smaller, more recent classes, as the faculty can better convey how well they know you.

2. Do well in the course. There's nothing I can do to spruce up a letter for someone who bombed the class. Sure, I can describe how tough each exam was, but, given the expectations for organic chemistry, such excuses are unfortunately non-mitigating. In general, try to ask faculty for letters only after you've aced their class – top 20% or so. Faculty enjoy writing strong letters for their top students. Great performances in the classroom make the letters easy to write. Writing a letter for anyone receiving a B or below is painful, and results in a weak recommendation unlikely to help admissions prospects. *Since I like to describe the extraordinary talents of my students, I typically will agree to write recommendation letters only for students who received an A- or higher grade in classes that I've taught.* I apologize to those students for whom I am unable to provide letters, but an unwillingness to write anything less than glowing imposes this restriction. This policy benefits the students I endorse by insuring a consistently frank and honest assessment, which is the insight valued by future employers and graduate/professional schools. I also hope students reluctantly declined letters of recommendation by me can find the strong letters they need to accomplish their goals from other faculty better able to brag about their accomplishments and talents.

3. Get involved at UC Irvine. Participation in the intellectual life of the university provides multiple benefits to your future career. With respect to recommendation letters, such activities can greatly strengthen the crucial part of the letter describing your talents and future in glowing terms. Go well beyond average in your pursuit of such activities. For example, a long list of labs you've worked in is much less impressive than dedicated pursuit of a single research goal obtained after a year of hard-work.

4. Politely approach faculty 6-8 weeks before you need the letter. Faculty work loads are enormous, often consuming 80+ hours per week. When you approach a faculty member to request a letter, you are asking the person to set aside 1-2 hours as a favor to you. Even a slightly brusque request can come across poorly. Similarly, given busy faculty schedules, you should ask for your letter long in advance. Your initial emailed query should remind the faculty member who you are, describe the letter required, and ask for a meeting from a list of five possible times within the next two weeks. If the faculty member has time to meet with you in person, you will be given a chance to greatly strengthen the letter. Show up on-time, and do not miss such meetings.

5. Get all of your paperwork ready in advance. When you meet, provide the letter writer with a folder containing hardcopies of all transcripts, your resumé, your personal statement, signed waivers, stamped envelopes, and preferably a photo of yourself. If you attended any other universities in addition to UCI, provide copies of your transcripts earned at those schools too. Your resumé should include all honors, awards, outside activities, interests, publications, etc. The personal statement explains who you are, where you come from, what you're planning to do, and why. Every application will require one. The waivers need to be obtained in advance for each letter of recommendation. On-campus, the Health Science Advisors of the School of Biological Sciences can help you establish a letter file with them, and provide a standard waiver. Waiving access to the letter provides a much stronger statement of confidence to admissions committees; *letters without signed access waivers are usually disregarded by admissions committees*. If the letter is being delivered on-campus (to Health Science advisors, for example), no stamp is required. However, all off-campus letters require stamped envelopes. Fill out the envelope, waiver forms, etc. in advance with as much information as you can, writing neatly in black ink; this includes information about me, such as my address, title, etc. In general, you want to make it as easy as possible for the recommender to write your letter.

For that reason, work through established letter mailing systems (Health Science advisors, PharmCAS, etc.) in requesting letters. With 100+ students per year applying to 15+ schools each, the logistics of letter writing become daunting. However, if I can send out a single letter on your behalf to something like the Dental School Letter Writer's Service, the barrier to letter writing is significantly lowered.

Important: I will not meet with you until all of the materials in this section are prepared, completed *exactly* as specified, and assembled in a single folder you can bring to the meeting. Please bring the completed checklist to our meeting.

6. Follow-up with the writer to insure the letter is sent. Send a gentle reminder, if necessary, a week or two before the deadline.

7. Write a thank you note to each letter writer. Do not use email for this. A folded sheet of nice paper is sufficient stationery for a short, hand-written note. The letter writer has taken a chance endorsing you, and appreciates being reassured that you are indeed the best candidate. There is no need to present your letter writer with a gift, as hearing good news from you is a welcome reward. If you feel compelled to present a gift to your letter writer, I recommend keeping the value of your gift below \$25.

8. Keep the letter writer informed. You might need another letter from the same person someday. Send them an email a few months after the dust has settled on the application process to let them know how it turned out. Watching students attain their dreams is one of the most rewarding aspects of being a faculty member. The faculty want to help you succeed, and enjoy watching your success.

9. When the shoe is on the other foot... Someday, you might be asked to evaluate talented people. Resolve now to dedicate the same energy and time to such tasks "someday" that you would hope to earn now.

In summary, you can do quite a lot to insure the Letter of Recommendation part of your application process goes smoothly and successfully. While you don't have to follow the guidelines listed here, anything you can do to lessen the burden on your letter writers will translate into a faster response to letter requests and likely stronger letters from the faculty who look forward to helping you achieve your career goals.

Checklist for Recommendation Letters

Please complete, and bring with you to our meeting.

1. Your full name: _____
2. Your email address: _____
3. The name you like to be called by teachers: _____
4. Your UCI major(s): _____ Expected graduation date: _____
5. Type of graduate school to which you're applying: _____

6. Please mark with checks below to indicate the following materials have been assembled into a single folder labeled with your name.

- Transcripts from all colleges attended
 - Resume or cv
 - Photograph
 - Personal statement
 - Waiver form(s)
 - Neatly, fill out all information about me (including return addresses on envelopes and application forms), as follows:
Gregory A. Weiss, Ph.D.
Title: Professor
Address: 1102 Natural Sciences 2, Dept. of Chemistry
U.C. Irvine
Irvine, CA 92697-2025
Phone: (949) 824-5566
Email: gweiss [at] uci.edu
 - Sign and date form.
- Envelope(s)
 - Affixed stamps for off-campus addresses
 - Addressed neatly with correct address, and my return address information given above.
- This form