Letters of recommendation

Outlook

I view letters of recommendation as a critical part of my job, and I will always consider a request for one. If you would like me to write you a letter of recommendation, I have outlined below some guidelines on how to help me write a letter on your behalf. I hope these suggestions will help you organize your materials and provide me with the important information I will need as I write.

Get to know me

I prefer to write letters where I can include details beyond just your academic performance in my class. This is to say that I would like to write about *you*, and I can get a better sense of that if we can establish a relationship outside lecture, such as interactions in office hours or in review sessions. This is especially true in larger classes, where lecture is a difficult place for us to get to know each other. What helps me? Getting to know *you*: your interests, your activities, your hobbies. Invite me to your performances or other events that interest you. Invite me for coffee or a meal. I can't guarantee that I can attend, but the gesture is certainly appreciated.

Plan early, even if it's crazy early

Please let me know as early as possible that you might be asking me for letters even if it you anticipate needing a letter a few years down the road. This allows me time to write down some notes in the moment I know you best, not several years down the line when we haven't spoken. Please be aware that I usually need at *least* two weeks notice to complete a letter. The more important the letter, the longer lead-time I need: for graduate school, medical school and competitive grants, I suggest contacting me ***at least one month*** before the deadline.

Ask me in person

Please ask me in person for a letter. Sometimes this is unavoidable, but if you're on-campus, I would greatly appreciate a one-on-one meeting. Also, ***never*** give out my name without letting me know that you'd like to list me as a reference. I'm happy to serve as a reference, but I need to know to expect call from, say, a potential employer.

Information I need from you

I will typically need a resume/CV, a personal statement and a timeline (particularly if you're not applying right away). For the timeline, include each application in chronological order by due date, a brief description of the program for which you are applying, clear instructions on how I will need to submit your letter and any relevant addresses, links and telephone/fax numbers. Also, please remind me of *all of* the situations in which I might have worked with you: because I work with so many students, I cannot often recall *all* the details of our relationship, and I'd like to not make a mistake on a recommendation letter. So please remind me: did I have you in class? Lab? Did we run in to each other on a campus-wide committee? Did you TA for the Department? Those sort of things.

This is a favor

Understand that you are asking for a favor, and that I may have to say "no." This may be because I don't have enough (or the right kind of) information to recommend you for the kind of position that you're looking for, or because you have not given me enough time to get it done. Never assume that the answer will always be "yes." But I do take this seriously, and I consider each request strongly.

Keep me informed of deadlines

As your application deadlines get closer, let me know what to expect with respect to deadlines and to whom I need to send the letters. As much warning as possible is always appreciated.

Your information must be well organized

Please provide an electronic file (a PDF of a Word or Excel file is perfect; including the information in a clearly laid out table is ideal) that has all of the information on the all your programs, deadlines, submission websites or email addresses, format for letters and how they should be submitted (e.g., do I send an email? do I print out a form and mail it in? do I get a link after you've submitted something?). Please do *not* send me a list of websites, expecting me to go digging for the information about how to submit a letter or when the deadlines are. I will also likely ask for a printout of this file when we meet one-on-one.

For hardcopy letters, please provide all the forms with clear instructions on how to complete them, a list of deadlines and postage (do not stick stamps to envelopes) for each form. Please provide this *in a single packet* if at all possible. Please do not make me download and print the PDFs. Disorganized packets increase the risk of losing something, so please double and triple check everything before handing it to me.

Never put anything in my mailbox that doesn't clearly have your name on it – other students are putting things in the same mailbox, and it's easy to get things confused if they aren't clearly labeled.

All at once, if possible

Please recognize that it's easier to do all the letters for a given student at once. So although your deadlines may occur over several months, anything you can do to compress the window in which I have the information to submit our letters, the better. For programs that require on-line submission, if you wait until the last minute to do your part, then I can't get my part submitted until then, which makes things considerably harder. If I don't have enough lead-time, then I cannot promise that I can complete the form on time.

Final thoughts

- It doesn't hurt to remind me as deadlines are approaching (email is fine for this.)
- If you decide not to apply to a given school/program, let me know.
- Please keep me up to date on how your application process/job search is going. I'd really like to know how it all came out.
- Should you need my contact information, please use the following:

Prof. Jimmy Blair
Assistant Professor
Williams College, Chemistry Department
47 Lab Campus Drive
Williamstown, MA 01267

Office: 413.597.4417
Fax: 413.597.4150

jab6@williams.edu

One last thing: please THANK me (and all your recommenders)

Your other recommenders and I would greatly appreciate a thank you. Also, please keep in touch!