

# How to Ask Your Professor for a Letter of Recommendation Via Email

Edited by [Marian Irish](#) and [30 others](#)

So, you need a recommendation from a professor for a scholarship? Grad school? A job? If you're making your request via email, follow these steps to do so politely and effectively and get the best possible reference.

## Steps

**Prepare to send your email request at least 5-6 weeks before the date by which the recommendation must be received.** **Don't wait until the last minute to ask them.** They lead busy lives, and you don't want them to rush through your recommendation, if they can even make the time to write it.

**Choose an appropriate professor.** Before you choose which professor to ask for a recommendation, ask yourself:

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- Does this professor know my name?
  - Have I ever spoken to this professor outside of class?
  - Did this professor give me a grade of 'B' or higher in the course?
  - Have I taken more than one course with this professor?

You want to choose a professor who can **write a letter** that includes specifics about your personal characteristics or accomplishments rather than "glittering generalities." The more you can answer "yes" to the questions above, the greater the likelihood you're making a wise choice.

**Address the letter properly.** Even though this is an e-mail, you want it to look nice. If you were on a first name basis (meaning they specifically asked you to call them by their first name and you did so constantly) address it by their first name. Otherwise use their appropriate title. Let's pretend we're writing a letter to Dr. Jones who was your professor for Archaeology. Dr. Jones was not on a first name basis with you, so you will start the letter with, "Dear Dr. Jones" followed by a comma or a colon.

**Put "Recommendation for [your name]?"** as the subject line.

**Start the first paragraph by stating what you want:** "I am writing to ask if you would be willing to write a letter of recommendation for me." Do not keep him or her guessing. In the next few sentences, lay out the facts:

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- Your name
  - Year in school
  - Major
  - Which course or courses you took with this professor, when, and what grade you earned
  - Why you need a recommendation [that is, what you are applying for]
  - When the recommendation letter is due

**Outline your relationship with the professor in the following paragraph and point out why you have asked him or her specifically.** Tell a little about yourself and why you are interested in the scholarship, graduate program, or job for which you need the reference.

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- You don't want to use mundane reasons like "I want to work there because they offered the most money" or "I want to go to this school because the degree looks really good on a resume."
  - Be professional and say something like, "I chose to apply to this museum because I was extremely excited about their tribal artifacts department."

- Does this professor have any special connection you are aware of to this company or place of employment? Or if it's a school, is s/he an alumnus? If so, include it. "I know that several pieces currently on display were acquired by you during your trip to the Amazon. I'm extremely hopeful that I might gain a position in a department with such a well-rounded collection to work with."
- If your experience with this professor had any influence on your choice, say so: "I had not considered going into research until I took your cell biology class. That motivated me to get a part-time job in Dr. Jin's lab and now I'm excited about the possibility of doing stem cell research after grad school." However, don't force this if it's not true.

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**Use the third paragraph as an opportunity to hint at what you'd like the professor to say about you:** You'll want to include any information about yourself which they may not be aware of. Some subtle ways of letting them know are:

- "I believe that you're aware through our conversations and my participation in your course that I'm dedicated to the field of archeology. I've completed my degree in Archeology as of June of this year. I was also able to intern at the museum under Dr. Marcus Brody, whom I believe you know. I also have extensive experience in cataloging items gained through my internship."
- "My other references will be able to talk about my academic ability, but you are the only one who really knows how hard I worked on my senior thesis and some of the obstacles I faced. I was hoping maybe you could talk about how I handle stress and deal with setbacks, because those are qualities the selection committee wants to see."

**Give them the details.** Where does the letter need to go? Who should it be addressed to? What is the address of the receiving school, person, etc. (professional letter format requires them to have this information) And when do you need it?

You're already asking them to put themselves out and write the letter for you. Don't ask them to address it and put postage on it for you, too. You want to be the LEAST amount of trouble, so the professor is not annoyed by having to do work you could have done for them (and should have). Plus, this way you can assure yourself that it was sent. If they offer to mail it for you, let them. If they're always forgetting to do things like put items in the mail or grade exams, then tell them that you need or want to present it in person with other letters, or other materials. That way you can be sure you have it. But include this in the e-mail so they know the time frame.

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**Close with information about how you will follow-up:** "I'll drop off the form and a stamped, addressed envelope in your faculty mailbox this week. I'll also send you an email reminder a week before the recommendation is due. Thanks again." Or, "I need to submit the letter of recommendation by August 3rd. If you're willing to write me a recommendation letter, please let me know and I'd be happy to come by your office any time to pick it up."

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**Thank them, whether or not they write the letter.** "Thank you in advance for your time, and consideration. I also wanted to extend an additional thank you for the time I spent under your instruction. I really enjoyed your course, and I can't express how much I've taken away from Archeology 101." If they were truly that special teacher, you can be more effusive in your praise. "I know I'll take the things I've learned in that course, and apply them in my life's work. Your mentoring really had a positive impact in my life, and I can never thank you enough."

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**Follow through as promised by delivering necessary materials and sending a reminder.** Follow up the e-mail with a phone call if you haven't heard anything in a week, two at the most. If you need to call, don't assume anything. First, see if they've even seen your e-mail. If not, be prepared to do your request verbally.

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**Before the deadline, take responsibility for checking with the scholarship program, graduate school, or prospective employer to verify that the recommendation was received.** If not, send a brief, polite email to the professor and offer to pay for overnight delivery.

**Thank them again.** After you get your letter of recommendation, send a thank you note to the professor. If the recommendation is in the right hands, send the professor a hand-written thank you note via U.S. mail, not via email. It's not only polite and the right thing to do, but you never know when that will pay benefits down the road. You may need another letter at another time, or if you're in a similar field, they may be able to assist you at some other time. If the letter does the trick and gets you the position, call the professor to share the good news!

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### Tips

- To avoid appearing pushy, send a thank you note to the professors a week or two before the due date, that mentions the date in passing, as a reminder.
- If you need a recommendation on short notice, write a short email asking whether he or she has time to do a one-time favor for you and explain the circumstances. If you get a positive response, write a second, more detailed email.
- **Remember those who help you, and always be willing to repay the favor.** An example would be you get that museum job and a summer internship opens up for students. You could call Dr. Jones and let him know so he can make his students aware of the opening.
- Read it before you send it. Make sure you have no spelling or grammatical errors. Have someone else proofread it for you if you're not a strong writer.
- **Attach your resume or CV to the email, and point out in the email that it is attached for the professor's reference.**
- **Use a pen or ballpoint pen in black to fill out the portion of the forms you might want your professor to use if you have any.**

### Warnings

- Some professors will take offense to being asked for a letter of recommendation via email. Visiting the professor in office hours, scheduling an appointment, or making a phone call shows that you are willing to give up your time and energy rather than simply writing an email.
- DO NOT ask to read a copy of the letter before it is sent. It is not appropriate to do this, since the idea is that the professor sends an honest evaluation without having to explain him/herself to the student. If you think that the professor may not have the greatest things to say, then ask if they believe that they have the impressions and materials that they need to write a recommendation that WILL benefit you in your goal of...
- If the professor provides a clue (e.g. an email sent to you prior to a completed letter of recommendation) that his/her recommendation won't be as favorable as you might like, thank him/her for his consideration and tell him/her that you have located another referee.
- **Remember that they are not obligated to write recommendations. Your professors have generally spent decades working very hard to build their reputation. Whenever they write a recommendation, they are putting that reputation on the line. In general, they are only going to do so for students whom they really believe in.**
- Never list people "who can recommend you positively" without prior agreement with them. This is also true if you have worked a lot with such people and you think you are sure they will.