

Amanda's Advice for Students: Letters of Reference

Dear Students,

Here is a handy reference guide that I have crafted after a number of years of students asking me for letters of reference. Some of these requests I have happily – and I seriously mean “happily” – complied with, and others I have had to refuse.

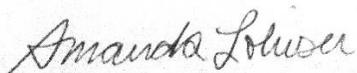
This guide is long but straightforward. I took a lot of time to compose my thoughts, and it turns out I have a lot of thoughts on this subject. If you're considering asking an instructor to take the time to write a letter for you, take the time to read this guide.

This is not a rant; it is not meant to be taken as a professor “blowing off steam” or an attempt to call ANYONE out. It is not snarky, but it is honest. It's been crafted with the purest intent of helping me to help you. This guide is simply a list of suggestions that should help you with two things:

1. Deciding who to ask for a letter of reference and
2. Understanding how to ask for a letter of reference.

I hope you find it helpful.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Amanda Lohiser". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored background.

Part 1: Deciding who to ask for a letter of reference

Don't ask a professor to write a letter for you just because you liked his/her class.

Don't get me wrong – instructors love nothing better than to know that you've enjoyed their classes and that you've learned a lot from them. Comments like that keep us going. But asking for a letter based solely on the fact that you liked/learned a lot from the class does not work. You've learned a lot from my class, but what have I learned about you? My letter, in that case, might be able to testify to the fact that you scored good marks in my class (assuming that “learning a lot” and “enjoying the class” also translated to “getting good marks”) but the fact remains that I still don't know you. See the next two sections for more information.

Helpful Hint

If you like the instructor and like his or her class, then start a dialogue. Talk about material you're enjoying. Stay after to discuss that day's topic, if you're particularly interested in it. At the same time, let the instructor in. Let him or her get to know you better. Read on!

Only ask instructors who know you.

This might sound obvious, but it's not. A letter of reference is more than (or should be more than) “This person got an A in my class.” A letter of reference should be a testimony to your character. If you were a student in one or even two of a professor's classes, but seldom interacted with the professor, then the professor will probably be able to recognize you to wave and greet you in the hall, remember that you were a good student, but probably will not be able to write a testimony to who you actually are in terms of your character.

Helpful Hint

Get to know your instructors. Simply asking questions after class (“When is this assignment due?”) is not enough. Talk to the professor about your interpretation of the material. Ask your instructors questions about themselves, and then share information about yourself. This is the reciprocal process of relationship building. Instructors should be seen as a resource of whom you can ask advice about your classes, your major, your potential career. As you ask these questions, you're gaining information and your instructors are gaining a better idea about who you are.

Only ask instructors who you feel can write a good letter for you.

Again, this sounds obvious. But if you've interacted with a number of professors over the course of your academic career, ask the ones with whom you have the best relationships. Ask the ones with whom you have the longest history, or the ones who know the most about you. These two qualities might or might not be mutually exclusive.

Understand that when a professor is writing a letter to testify about your character, that person is putting his or her name and reputation up against your name and your actions for all the world to see (or at least the academic world!). That professor will be judged, for lack of a better word, in some ways by the students that he or she chooses to recommend. So this is not something we take lightly.

Helpful Hint

Start interacting with your instructors early on. Relationships take time to build. Make a good first impression, and then keep it going. This doesn't mean that you should shower your professor with flattery – this is quickly recognized as being insincere. If you want your instructor to write a genuine letter for you, then you have to put a genuine effort into letting that person get to know you. Put your best foot forward.

Part 2: How to ask for a letter of reference

Give the instructor lots of time.

This is perhaps the number one reason why I might turn down a student who asks me for a letter. A letter of reference – a good letter of reference – might seem like a short, one-page document ("It's just a few paragraphs! How long can it take?") but it takes a long time to craft. As you might know from class assignments, sometimes the toughest things to write are the shortest, since you must say so much with so few words. Therefore, an instructor might draft a letter, let it sit for a few days, return to it, tweak it again, and so on. I cannot emphasize enough that this takes time.

What's more, as we are but mere mortals, we, your instructors, have lives. These lives are filled with lesson planning, grading, answering students' questions, and all the other stuff, like social time, families, eating, sleeping, etc. Asking an instructor to hammer out a letter with a deadline of two or three days implies that you expect that person to drop everything for you and magically make several free hours materialize in his or her schedule. This is not only offensive, but it is nearly always logistically impossible, too.

Helpful Hint

Watch your deadlines. If you think you might apply for a job or a graduate program or a study abroad opportunity – if you're even entertaining the notion – then check deadlines and start approaching instructors way ahead of time. The absolute bare minimum of a time frame to ask a professor for a letter is two weeks. We prefer longer.

Ask as if you're asking a favor – because you are.

As you've gathered by now, letters take time. You're asking a person to commit several hours of his or her life to do something for you. Please understand that if you are a person that that professor has gotten to know, then he or she cares about your future and your successes (see "Who to ask" above); therefore, he or she will be happy to write a letter for you. But it's still a favor. So don't craft your request as "Hey, if you could just jot down a few lines for me, that'd be great, kay, thanks!" Ask as a favor. "Would you be willing to write a letter of reference for me? Etc." (More on that "etc." in the next few pages.)

Helpful Hint

Yes, you're asking for a favor, but you're also asking for something that you need in order to pursue your goals. You're also asking a really busy person who might have a lot on his or her mind. Therefore, it is completely appropriate to send a friendly reminder, say, at the half-way point of those four weeks or so you've given the instructor. At the two week mark, it's okay, if you haven't heard from the professor, to send a friendly email saying that you're just checking in, that you appreciate the time s/he is taking to do this, and that if there's any additional information s/he might need, that you'd be happy to provide it.

Ask in person.

Obviously, if there is a geographical distance that makes this impossible, then an email (see next section) or a phone call works, too. But if at all possible, ask in person. Face-to-face interactions are always more preferred than electronic ones. And asking a favor is nice to do in person.

Helpful Hints

If you are asking a professor whose class you are currently taking, email him or her and ask if you can stay after class to talk. Wait patiently until students' class-related questions are over, and then approach the instructor, who is now already expecting to talk to you.

If you are asking a professor whose class you are not currently taking, arrange for a meeting. This could also serve as a nice opportunity for the instructor to hear what you've been up to since you were in his or her class. Hopefully you've stayed in touch, but if not, make a point of catching up.

Most professors love hot beverages. Caffeinated ones are even better. Most campuses have a café or a coffee shop. Ask your professor if he or she would like to meet you for a cup of coffee to catch up, even for 30 minutes between classes at his or her convenience (this is another reason for allowing for enough time). Believe me, if you're a student that we've gotten to know, we'd really enjoy catching up with you. And if you're nearing graduation, we kind of know what's coming. We're clever like that.

If you must ask via email, ask individually.

Do not – Do. Not. – send a form letter to multiple recipients. No matter how well you think you've crafted it, it sounds like this: "Hi! If you're receiving this email, then you're one of the lucky professors I'm asking for a letter!" This is a favor – a favor you're asking of someone who has gotten to know you individually. So ASK individually. Write an email to that person explaining why you're asking him or her. Make it specific. Make it personal. Show your character.

Helpful Hint

Don't copy/paste. This is where the individual part comes in. Compose a new email each time. That way it doesn't ever read like a form letter. Plus, copying/pasting can lead to embarrassing situations like forgetting to change the name, and sending out an email asking a favor to a professor's email address but calling him or her by the wrong name. This has happened to me on a number of occasions. It's not a good start. Honest mistakes happen to everyone, but this is not the time to make that particular mistake. Double, triple, quadruple check your email. Again, this is why asking in person is even better.

SHOW APPRECIATION.

How much can I emphasize this? Appreciation makes the world go 'round. Appreciation makes people feel... well, appreciated. Thank your professors for taking the time to consider writing a letter. When they agree to do it, thank them in advance for their time. And once you've received the letter or receive confirmation that they've sent the letter – Say thank you. Say it right away. Express your understanding of how much time you know this has taken. Express your gratitude for the continued relationship. Then, don't drop them.

Helpful Hint

Don't forget this step. Say thank you. It really comes back to that one simple thing.

And after you've gotten accepted to your fabulous new job, or your awesome grad school, or your cool study-abroad program, drop your professors a line. Send a postcard. Send an email. Give a phone call. Buy a cup of coffee. Keep in touch with us; we'd be interested in finding out what you've done with your life. Because if we've taken the time to write a letter for you, it means we like you! Seriously. We do.