

“HELP ME HELP YOU”: IMPLEMENTING REFERENCE REQUEST GUIDELINES TO IMPROVE THE RECOMMENDATION LETTER PROCESS

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To: che_prof@univ.edu

From: che_student@univ.edu

Subject: Recommendation Letters!

Sent: Tuesday, February 19, 2019 2:51 am

Dear Professor,

I was wondering if you would be willing to write me a letter of recommendation for the summer internships I'm applying to. I had you for Material & Energy Balances last semester and earned a B in your class. I know we haven't interacted much, but I don't really have anyone else to ask. The letters (5 in total) are due this Friday. Please let me know if you can help!

Sincerely,

Your Student

Unfortunately, emails like the one above are very familiar to most faculty members. We want to support our students as they apply for internships, full time jobs, and graduate school, but we often struggle with how to do this in an efficient and effective manner. This is especially challenging given the number of students we have and the late and often incomplete nature of recommendation requests. Although there are several online guides on how to request letters of reference from professors,^[1,2] students may not proactively search for these, so it can be helpful to have published guidelines. Developing reference request guidelines can go a long way towards addressing this problem by clarifying qualification and documentation requirements up front and encouraging students to take a more active role in the process. An example of the reference request guidelines is shown on the next page.^[3]

It is most effective to share reference request guidelines with students at the beginning of the semester. By discussing your policies up front, it reminds students that in order to get a strong letter of support, they must go beyond just getting a good grade in the course. Specifically, it encourages them

to participate meaningfully in class, attend office hours, and discuss their desired career path with you. Asking students to point to particular instances in their interactions with you where they demonstrated desirable traits can help you write a more specific and convincing letter. Requesting that students describe related experiences also helps students articulate how they are well-suited for the position, which can help them in interviews. Importantly, these guidelines impress upon students the time and care that go into writing a letter of reference and asks them to be active participants in the process.

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REFERENCE REQUEST GUIDELINES:

I am happy to support student applications for internships, graduate programs, scholarships and full-time employment. Please review the policies and procedures below prior to requesting a letter of recommendation or professional reference.

Letters of Recommendation

To qualify for a letter of recommendation for an internship, co-op, or internal BS/MS program*, students should:

- Have completed at least one semester of class with me
- Earned a grade of B or higher in all classes completed with me
- Interacted with me in a meaningful way outside of class or through consistent class participation

To request a letter of recommendation, students must:

- Submit the request in writing via email at least two weeks in advance of the deadline
- Include the following in the initial request:
 - Deadline and mechanism of submission (email from program, website upload, etc.)
 - Up-to-date resume
 - Unofficial transcript
 - Answers to the following questions:
 - Briefly describe the opportunity.
 - Why are you interested in this opportunity?
 - What is your ultimate career goal? How will this opportunity help you achieve that?
 - What characteristics about yourself would you like me to include in the letter? Can you point to instances in the course/our interactions where you demonstrated those traits?
 - What other experiences have you been involved in (research, internship, clubs, etc.) that are relevant to the position? What did you learn/gain from each experience?

*Since letters of recommendation for external graduate programs and national scholarships/fellowships are longer and require more detail, students must meet additional requirements. Please schedule a meeting and discuss with me at least one month prior to the deadline to see if I feel I will be able to write you a strong enough letter based on your performance and our interactions.

Professional References

Companies typically request professional references whom they may contact to gain additional insight into a candidate's personality, work ethic, and overall interpersonal skills once that candidate is under serious consideration for a position. As such, it is important that I know you well enough to serve as a personal reference. You must have interacted with me significantly outside of class for me to serve as a professional reference.

You must ask me first before listing me as a reference. If I agree, I will provide you with the best contact information to put in the application. Make sure to include your resume, unofficial transcript, job description, and why you are interested in the opportunity in your request.

By requiring students to be engaged in the reference request process, you are helping them to take responsibility for their own professional development, which will be imperative as they work with managers and mentors in the future. This also allows students to practice professional communication by writing and organizing documents and submitting them in a timely manner. Although students may need to be reminded to review the guidelines after their initial request, having a published policy can enable time savings and facilitate saying “no” if the reference requirements have not been met. In my experience, students are happy to provide the information requested and appreciate the clarity of the expectations. In the case that they do not meet the requirements, these guidelines help students identify a more appropriate reference writer who can better speak to their strengths. Establishing refer-

ence request guidelines can be mutually beneficial for both students and faculty and lead to more effective and efficiently written letters.

REFERENCES

1. Seattle Pacific University, Recommendation letter etiquette: guidelines for requesting a faculty reference. <https://spu.edu/depts/eng/documents/RECOMMENDATIONLETTEREtiquette.pdf> accessed September 6, 2019.
2. Doyle A (2019) How to ask a professor for a letter of recommendation. <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/how-to-ask-a-professor-for-a-recommendation-2060798> accessed September 6, 2019.
3. Goldberg D (2019) Letters of recommendation and professional references. <https://dsgoldberg.weebly.com/reference-request.html> accessed September 6, 2019. □

This column addresses aspects of lifelong learning for current students, alumni, and faculty. Examples of student and faculty activities that involve industrial practice and engagement as well as continuing education are welcome. These topics may not always lend themselves to the traditional scholarly format with formal assessment and extensive literature review but may be more editorial in nature. Submit papers through journals.flvc.org/cee, include lifelong learning in the title, and specify lifelong learning as the article type.

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