

Guidelines for Getting Recommendations

Most colleges want two or three recommendation letters from people who know you in and out of the classroom. Often they require at least one from an academic teacher (sometimes for a specific subject), and/or your school counselor. But don't forget about other people who know you well: your employer, your athletic coach, or your scout/youth group leader are also great options for a recommendation letter. Here are some tips on whom-and how-to ask:

The best teacher to ask is...

If you don't have a clear favorite, your English or math teachers usually make good candidates. Ask a teacher from your junior year unless a current teacher has known you long enough to form an opinion.

Think about which teacher will remember you best, because of your class participation and personal interaction. That may be a teacher in whose class you've gotten top grades, but it could also be a teacher who knows how hard you've worked to get B's and C's.

The best time to ask is...

Ask at least one month ahead of your deadline, two weeks at a minimum. If you're asking a popular teacher, he or she might have a lot of letters to write. And be sure to also allow time for snail mail. Often the college's deadline is receipt date, not the postmark date.

The best way to ask is...

Remember you're asking for a favor, don't demand one.

Don't be shy. Teachers and counselors are usually happy to help you, as long as you respect their time constraints.

Ask in a way that allows a teacher to decline comfortably if he/she does not have time to do an adequate job. For example: "Do you feel you know me well enough, and do you have enough time to write a letter of recommendation for me?"

Follow up with a written request with instructions, the deadline, and an addressed and stamped envelope.

Give them something to work with

Provide a "brag sheet" or resume reminding them of your accomplishments over the years. It will make their job easier.

Follow up

Follow up with your recommendation writers a week or so prior to your first deadline, to ensure recommendations have been mailed or to see if they need additional information from you. And send a thank-you note to everyone who provided a recommendation.

