

Insight Sheet

Topic: Letters of Recommendation

“Would you be willing to write a letter of recommendation for me?” That question, in various forms, is asked every year by individuals seeking to acquire scholarships, internships, jobs, etc. It is a natural progression as students enter degree programs, become familiar faces, and then request that those who know them best (academically speaking) consider testifying to their abilities. As such, the letter of recommendation (LOR) is almost a daily occurrence across academe. Why then is it so uncomfortable to ask for one? And why does it seem that few requests occur in a thoughtful manner?

To assist LAEP students as they request LORs from our faculty (or others), this *Insight Sheet* will discuss 1) what you are actually asking of the referee* and 2) what you should provide the referee. Typically these requests occur in a somewhat knee-jerk manner. Having thought through these points and prepared materials will help ensure you have the right person, and that s/he is equipped to author the most effective recommendation possible.

What are you really asking for?

A letter of recommendation is, at its essence, a testimony to your capacity to perform and/or meet the high standards of an award. That is, the referee is looking backward in time at what you have demonstrated in class, in student governance, in everyday interactions (e.g., hallway greetings) and the array of activities in a department (e.g., ASLA events), and use their professional experience to assess aspects of your personage. In particular, the referee is going to attest to your present and future ability as evidenced by your strengths and weaknesses in the following key areas:

- Work habits
- Personality
- Skills
- Ethics
- Attitude
- Devotion
- Progress/advancement
- Ability to listen and receive correction

You should know that writing LORs is an expectation that professors understand they will engaged in. However, LORs are by no means an expectation for every student. While faculty members wish that all students conducted themselves in a manner deserving of commendation, that is not reality. As such, LORs are *requested*. The requestor should never *expect* that a reference is due them. In other words, the

requestor's track record should win over the potential referee so that s/he is pleased to author the LOR. How then do you arrive at that point of making the request but with a better than likely chance that your request will be met with enthusiasm and interest?

The road to a quality LOR and thus to the coveted "I'd be glad to write it" response starts years before the request. The following principles should shed some light on steps you can take leading up to a successful request.

- Elevator Talk
 - e.g., did you tend to smile and say hello in the hallway?
- Can-Do
 - e.g., when a project 'went wrong' did you respond with a cup-half-full outlook?
- Engaging
 - e.g., was yours a familiar face during department activities?
- Volunteerism
 - e.g., would you be someone others saw during outreach efforts?
- Leading from the Front
 - e.g., how did you step up to spearhead a needed cause?
- Proactive
 - e.g., when problems were observed, such as with a class, did you come forward with ideas and not merely complaints?
- Creativity + Realism
 - e.g., were you an out-of-the-box thinker who brought forward ideas and then made them viable by honing them to present realities?

These (and more) principles are the means by which you pave the road to an outstanding LOR. But that alone is not enough. When you arrive at the day of request you also want to be armed with the information that will make it painless for the referee to craft the LOR. Commonly, the referee would prefer you have the following answers for them:

- **Who/what?**
 - Specify who or what the organization is that your sending the LOR to or what you are applying for.
- **Why you want it?**
 - While this may seem obvious, your referee needs to more fully understand. Is this your dream job? Are you simply looking for some scholarship money, or are you THE person for this award?
- **Why I'm someone to write it?**
 - Remind the referee about the working relationship you have with her/him (e.g., classes you took from them, projects you've both worked on, extra activities they led which you participated in)
- **Deadline (letter vs. application)**
 - When is the LOR due or when you would like it submitted?
- **Sent directly? Online?**
 - Are referees to send LORs through the mail or submitted online?
 - LORs usually aren't given out as hard copies to the requestor unless in a sealed envelope.

- NOTE: It's courteous to ask if the referee prefers an addressed envelope and stamp if sent in the mail.
- **Resume to review**
 - Provide a resume for the writer to review and know of your accomplishments and past experience.
- **Bulletpoints of what your strengths are**
 - It's not necessary to always include this, but giving the writer a list of your strengths will help if they're not completely familiar with you.
 - While this may seem arrogant, it can help them recall (from the hundreds of students they have known) how you stand out. Remember, they are free to use or not use those points.
- **Will you need other letters?**
 - Specify if you'll need other letters for internships, other job applications, etc., and, if so, when.

In closing, remember that your success is also the success of your professors. The better the job you earn, the better it reflects upon the program. How well you are placed in the profession will enable future students to have a tie to practice, will enable class projects with your firm, and will enable you to give back with your time, talent and resources. The LOR is one step among many in helping students receive the recognition and rewards they are due. But fundamentally those recommendations can only be as good as the individual for whom they are written.