

So you want a letter of recommendation?

A guide for letters from Professor Howard

Gaining a letter of recommendation is sometimes thought of as the ‘easy’ part of an application packet. However, getting a *good* letter of rec often requires a lot more effort and time management than people think. Though obvious, it’s important to note that **it is in your best interest to make your busy letter writer's job as easy as possible.**

Each year, I’m asked by multiple current and previous students to write letters of rec. I take this obligation seriously, but it becomes more difficult when I receive a large number of vague or last minute requests. This document outlines the considerations and materials I need from you to write the best possible letter I can, thereby increasing your chances of getting that dream position.

Please note: If I agree to write the letter, I always write the most positive and fair recommendation I can. However, if you’d like a letter from me, I request that you waive your right to view that letter. It is unnecessary to monitor your letters, and doing so can result in less than honest (and sometimes less positive) recs.

Before asking Professor Howard for a letter of recommendation, take into consideration the following information:

1. **How well do we know each other?** Have we only chatted for five minutes? Have you taken a course with me ages ago and hardly participated? Or have you been in multiple classes with me, completed research under my guidance, and/or spent countless hours chatting in my office?
If we don’t know each other very well, that doesn’t mean I automatically won’t write a letter, but it’s going to make it a lot harder. In that case, there *may* be someone else on this campus that knows you better than I do who could write a more personal letter.
2. **Am I the right person to write this letter?** I’m willing to take a stab at writing for whatever job or program you are applying to. However, sometimes the expertise of your letter writer really makes a difference in your application packet, and sometimes I don’t know how best to write a letter for a certain position. If you are applying to graduate school for animal behavior, you’ll REALLY want some of our more animal-minded professors to be writing for you. If you want a business-related job, one of our top business professors might be a good idea. I won’t say no just because you’re applying in an area I’m unfamiliar with, but this is something to keep in mind when building your letter of rec portfolio.
3. **When is this letter due?** If you are asking me to write a letter within a very short time frame (e.g., under 3 weeks), there is a good chance I cannot help you out. *I write fairly lengthy, personal letters, and they often take the better part of a day to complete.* Depending on the time of year, finding this large chunk of time can be difficult. A rushed letter is not going to be nearly effective as one that I have adequate time to complete.
4. **Did you do acceptable work with me?** There is nothing I hate more than having to reject writing a letter of recommendation because a “C” student who never

showed up to class and failed my final is asking me to wax poetic about their academic strengths. It's always horribly awkward both for the student and me. Listen- all your professors want you to succeed, but we can't lie for you, and it's often better for me to just decline if I think I will have to expend lots of effort writing a subpar or unsupportive letter.

Here are the materials I will require from you if you want a good letter of recommendation:

1. **Information about what types of programs or jobs you are applying to, and why.** This is, of course, a good question to ask yourself first. Let me know specifically what you are looking for, WHY you are applying (aka, why you want this type of job/education), and what your future goals or career aspirations are. This will help me tell the search committee where your drive to be with them is coming from. You can do this either in an email to me, or we can set up a time to chat in person.
2. **An updated resume or CV.** Even if I've had you in class, I probably don't know about your extracurricular activities, summer jobs, or GPA. Having the most current info about your background will let me weave a story outside of our personal experiences together.
3. **A copy of the cover letter or personal statement for the position.** This allows me to write the letter in a way that aligns with how you are presenting yourself. If you are still working on this, you can informally tell me what you plan to write and send me the final document as you finish it.
4. **An Excel or Google Doc that lists all necessary info for me to send letters.** This should include: the name of the program/job/school, the type of program/job, a link to the job add (if possible), *the due date for letters of rec, *how to send the letter of rec (email, snail mail, online form, etc.). If you are applying for a PhD program, please list which professors you are applying to work with. If you share a Google Doc with me, I can update a column as I send in the letters so you can track my progress as well.
5. **Any additional forms needed for your application.**
6. **As applicable, please provide the following:**
 - a. **Example of class assignments & what your final grade was.** If you have taken a course with me, please attach what you consider to be good work in this class (a paper or other assignment) or remind me of the work you did with me (e.g., a collab project). With an average of 75 students per semester, and my notoriously bad memory, this is necessary to remind me.
 - b. **Outline of research duties.** If you completed research with me, please remind me what project you were working on and what you did on that project. Did you code behaviors? Run participants? Do literature reviews? Schedule families? Run analyses? Complete a 390, or 490?
7. **Any additional information you would like me to include or that you think would be helpful to know when writing your letter.**

Please be sure to REMIND me about due dates or follow up to make sure that materials were submitted adequately. Once in awhile, an email request goes directly from the job or university into my spam folder, which isn't great for anyone.

Reference Details

(For use when filling out forms ahead of time)

Dr. Lauren H. Howard
Associate Professor, Psychology
Franklin & Marshall College
415 Harrisburg Ave
Lancaster, PA, 17603

Ph: (717) 358-4454

Email: lauren.howard@fandm.edu

Website: dax.fandm.edu OR lauren-howard.com