



A Guide for HSU Geology & Geoscience majors seeking Letters of Recommendation

What are letters of recommendation? And, why are you being asked to provide them?

Letters of recommendation are a critically important aspect of your application to scholarships, graduate schools, jobs, or internships. Often written by your professors, **these letters assess things like your knowledge of geology, ability to learn quickly, maturity, quantitative and reasoning skills, work ethic, ability to work in a team and independently, and writing and presentation abilities** – all of which help assess your academic and/or professional potential in concert with your GPA or your score on standardized tests (e.g., GRE). Take the process of asking for a letter seriously because professors often write very strong letters for students who have advanced interpersonal skills and a strong work ethic, even with a less than desirable GPA.

Who should I ask to write a letter of recommendation on my behalf?

Step #1: ask someone who has observed many of your skills over several semesters (especially if you have showed improvement) instead of a professor from a class that you earned an A in but who barely knows you. Try to identify potential letter writers early on in your undergraduate degree. Ideally, these are people who you have (1) had multiple conversations with, (2) taken at least one – preferably at least three – classes, thesis, or directed study under their supervision, and, (3) demonstrated your academic and/or professional potential to (e.g., geology knowledge, fast learner, maturity, work ethic, work in a team and independently).

Step #2: carefully examine the internship, job, or graduate school application you are applying for. What does the advertisement ask of you? Who is their ideal candidate? What specific skills are they seeking? Answering these questions will help you figure out if you are qualified and which professor would write the most effective letter. If you are applying for a position that requires multiple letters, ask people who can talk about different aspects of your skill set. This way, your letter writers address all aspects of your skill set.

Where to start?

Think about your skills before asking someone for a letter. Write out all of your strengths and weaknesses, and next to each attribute, jot down which professors have seen you in action the most frequently. For example:

STRENGTHS:

Advanced GIS skills – Prof. A
Science writing – Prof. B & Prof. C
Community outreach & volunteering – Prof. C
Field notes, observation, mapping skills – Prof. B
Working in a group – Prof. A, B and C

WEAKNESSES:

Public speaking – Prof. A saw me give 2 talks where I improved my grade from a B to a A-
Rock/mineral ID – Prof. B had me in 312 and 314, where I improved my grade from a C to an B+ by practicing an additional 2 hours a week on my own
**Remember that your improvement to overcome these weaknesses are part of your skill set!!

By this point, you should have determined (1) that you are qualified for the position you are applying for, (2) what skills and personality traits you would like highlighted in a letter, and (3) who will write the most effective letter(s). Continue to the next page **only** if you have determined these three things...

What does the letter writer need from you? *Advanced notice is most important!*

Give your letter writer(s) adequate notice, typically three weeks or more (one to two weeks is not advisable, but if in a bind, the worst they could say is no). Remember, professors are already busy with teaching, grading, research, personal lives, other letters of recommendation, so you want to make it as easy as possible for your letter writer to write you a strong letter!

You should also prepare the following materials for the letter writer:

- A brief description of the position applying for
- A draft of your “personal statement” (sometimes called a “letter of intent”), in which you explain how you are qualified for the position, why you are applying, and sometimes a statement about who you wish to work with and why
- A copy of your DARS
- A short list of YOUR attributes that you can suggest to the letter writer to address in your letter. Do not skip this step, as the letter writer is more likely to agree to write you a letter if you are prepared and they will write a stronger letter, tailored to your strengths relevant to the position.
- Specify **how to submit** the letter. Letters are usually submitted electronically. If the letter is to be submitted via snail mail, include an addressed, stamped envelope.

How to ask and what to do if they say no?

Ask however you feel most comfortable, whether in email or in person, but conduct yourself professionally. If you ask in person, its best to ask during office hours or an appointment instead of while on a field trip, during a class/lab, or when you see them at the grocery store. If you ask in an email, make sure the subject line properly indicates what you are asking for, such as, "Letter of recommendation request for NASA internship; March 1, 2016." Avoid generic and/or impolite subject lines like "hey" or "rec letter" or "favor." If your letter writer does not respond to your email, seek them out in person. If your letter writer says “no”, do not take it personally. Go to the next person on your list. Avoid telling the second person that the first person said no- there is no point in doing this.

How to follow-up?

Send polite and professional follow-up reminders if someone agreed to write a letter but has not yet submitted it. For example, if the due date is March 1st, and you asked for the letter on February 1st, you can send a follow-up email 2 weeks prior, 1 week prior, and 2 days prior to the deadline. Don't feel guilty for sending reminders, but don't act annoyed either. Remember, this person is doing you a favor. Send your letter writer a quick thank you email, particularly if you are successful in obtaining the position. This small action is a huge reward for professors who write hundreds of letters.

Final thoughts

- *If your application is unsuccessful, remember that rejection is the norm. It is a bummer, but never take it personally! Evaluate what you could do better next time and ask the letter writer what you could do to improve your skill set.*
- **A “letter of recommendation” is not the same things as a “reference”.** *A reference is someone you list on an application who may be contacted to provide information about the candidate (you), whereas a letter of recommendation is a letter is written on your behalf. Still ask the person to serve as a reference, or at least tell them immediately that you did so. Compile the list of materials as described above for the people you listed as references. Sometimes references are asked to write a letter for you, but only if you make it in the last round of applicants. Be sure the person you listed would be willing to do so, if they are contacted.*
- *Every faculty member has their own preferences and opinions about letter writing. Be sure to **communicate openly** with your letter writers/references!*