

Letters of Recommendation

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As an international applicant your application speaks on your behalf to the admission committee. While your grades/scores are supposed to represent your intellectual capabilities and your essay presents your point of view, recommendations by those who know you give the university an independent assessment of your skills and qualities.



Though students are advised not to write their own recommendation letters (reco letters), often faculty and reporting heads do not feel comfortable drafting the letters. In other cases, the applicant would like them to include some specifics in the letter. Thus the student ideally would have to prepare a draft on the basis of which the final letter will be prepared.

Every school requires a set of 2-3 such letters. Normally the schools have a reco format (grading sheet) in their application form, which needs standardized information like rank in class, analytical skills, attendance etc. One can also attach a letter (covering other aspects) to the grading sheet.

Choosing the right people:

- ▶ You need to make sure that the people who give you the recommendation letters have known you for a sufficiently long time and on a professional basis.
- ▶ Fresh graduates would need recommendation letters from the faculty at undergraduate and/or graduate level. The faculty would be in a position to evaluate the student if they have taught them at least two courses. It would be helpful if the courses were relevant to the study program you have applied to.
- ▶ At work the reporting head interacts with you on a day-to-day basis and hence would be the best person to comment on your performance.
- ▶ For most MBA applications, the reco letters have questions that need to be answered and the employers are in the best position to comment on these than faculty. Example: a graduate in history cannot have his faculty comment on his suitability for a management program.
- ▶ Personal Contacts are not considered valid.

Position of the referee:

- ▶ A recommendation from a professor would be far more impressive than one from a lecturer.
- ▶ The remarks of your reporting-head who plays an important role in the company and is an experienced person are more valued.

- ▶ However a recommendation from the CEO of the company who knows you personally but has not interacted regularly at work would not add any value.
- ▶ An alumni from the school one is applying to, can give you an additional recommendation commenting on your suitability for the study program.

Relationship you share with the person:

Make sure that the person shares a positive relationship with you to ensure you get a good recommendation and of course within the time frame. Approach people at least a month before the deadline to run through 2-3 drafts before finalizing it. Prepare an initial draft and check with them if they are comfortable putting their signature on it.

Touch upon different aspects:

The reco letters on one hand should agree on some common points like analytical skills, interpersonal skills etc while on the other mention something unique. For example, an instructor would talk about your class participation, attendance and performance in the course while a project guide can write on teamwork ability and leadership qualities. One should avoid repetition or redundancy of facts.

Recommendation letters are not only important for admission but also when considering the applicant for an assistantship. A mention of a college seminar on a new research area in which you have actively participated would thus be a scoring point.

In line with other documents:

It is important that documents match, so if your SOP (Statement of Purpose) talks about your interest in hard core mechanical engineering subjects while your reco letter from your project guide talks about your project in software development, then there is a contradiction of facts. Similarly if an MBA aspirant mentions leadership qualities in his application essays and none of his recos comment on this then his credibility is lost.



Writing Tips:

If you are drafting the reco letters yourself, then the following points should be kept in mind:

- ▶ The letters should ideally be taken on the college/institution/organization letterhead. If not, then the name, contact details and designation of the person should be clearly mentioned.
- ▶ The style of writing should be distinctly different in the three drafts to make it sound genuine to the reader.
- ▶ Focus on a few qualities in each reco so that it stays in the mind of the reader. Divide the points among the three letters.
- ▶ Do not include too many adjectives or superlative degree remarks in the recommendation. The statements should sound positive but not flattering.
- ▶ Avoid redundancy in the style of writing. For example starting every sentence with “She has been very active in class,” or “She has above average analytical skills” etc. The letter should have a flow and not seem like a list of statements about you.
- ▶ Get a third person opinion about the draft before finalizing it. There are cases when statements that might sound positive to you, might be interpreted in a different manner by others. For example, one reco letter said that “He is always at his job, whether in the office or otherwise.” For a reader it might seem as if

the person takes work home, which is not always considered positive.

- ▶ Avoid structural mistakes and use simple language. Do not manipulate facts. For example: If your professor puts you in the top 5% in every category that he’s been asked to rank you, and your transcripts show that you averaged in the bottom 25% of your class, it’s bound to raise some eyebrows.
- ▶ The letter should be crisp and to the point. Avoid repetition and irrelevant details.

Be sure to include most of these points, though not necessarily all of them:

- ▶ Academic Performance.
- ▶ Attendance and class participation.
- ▶ Analytical skills and problem solving ability.
- ▶ Communication skills.
- ▶ Teamwork Ability.
- ▶ Leadership Qualities and Decision Making.
- ▶ Being well-organized and particular about deadlines.
- ▶ Crisis Management and working under pressure.
- ▶ Achievements like being a class topper, winning the best project prize etc, playing a strategic role in a company project.
- ▶ Interpersonal skills, relationship with peers.
- ▶ Your suitability to the study program.

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Coffee and Croissant

According to legend, coffee beans were first discovered in the town of Kaffa, Ethiopia. As the advancing Arabs had cut off access to Ethiopia (known then as Abyssinia) by the eighth century A.D., it first made its way into Arabic as **qahwah**. By the thirteenth century, the Kaffa beans were brought into southern Mediterranean Europe as **café**.

It would take a failed siege of Vienna in the latter half of the Seventeenth Century by the advancing Ottoman Turks to introduce the term and the beverage into German-speaking Europe as **kaffee**.

Apparently, the Turks had retreated in such haste (according to Austrians - Turks,

of course, describe it as a calculated withdrawal) that they left behind, among other things, sacks and sacks of coffee beans. As a result, the Austrians were introduced to coffee and, incidentally, celebrated the event by enjoying a certain puffed pastry created especially for the occasion: the **croissant** or *crescent* (to symbolize victory over the Turks whose flags bore a crescent moon)

The term croissant was used instead of the literal German translation **halbmond** or the German culinary term currently in use, **hoernchen**, because at the time French was the language *en vogue* within aristocratic circles due to the prominence of the French King, Louis XIV. ■