Letter of Recommendation Instructions

I’m happy to write letters of recommendation for law school, graduate school, internships, and so on. You can help me write a better letter for you by following these instructions. If you are applying for law school (or even if you aren’t), please also read through the “letters of recommendation” info at BYU’s pre-law website (under “Applying for Law School”).

**Give me your materials well in advance of the deadline**—ideally three or more weeks early. If you are in town, **come visit in my office** so we can chat for a few minutes about your goals.

**Choose your letter writers carefully**

Generally, you should request letters of recommendation from faculty who (a) have observed excellent performance from you and (b) know you as an individual.

**If you did not receive excellent grades from me**, you should probably ask somebody else for a letter. In most classes, “excellent” means an A- or A; in internship-related classes, “excellent” is strictly an A. Admissions committees expect me to characterize your performance relative to other students. I will be honest in doing so.

**If I have not known you very long (less than a full semester)**, you should probably ask somebody else for a letter. I always state in my letter how long I have known you; admissions committees expect me to. They are less impressed if I have known you only two months. Ideally, you will have talked with me several times outside of class. The better I know you, the better I can write about you.

**If the class you took from me was large (50 or more students)**, I probably don’t know you well enough to write a letter unless you are somebody who interacted with me regularly outside of class. If I don’t know you as an individual, my letter will (unavoidably) sound generic.

These are strong suggestions, but not requirements. I will write a letter for anybody who requests it. Occasionally students ask for a letter after having taken only one class from me and visiting me a handful of times in my office while the class was in progress. Just bear in mind that I will be honest in characterizing how well I know you and how well you have performed.

**Materials to provide to me**

I can write a better letter if you provide as many of the following materials to me as possible. Please give me photocopies, not originals, so that I don’t need to worry about returning them. (If you do give me an original, just put a sticky note on it reminding me to give it back.) The purpose of all this is to help me personalize my letter so it sounds less generic.
Really important: Instructions to me. I receive many requests for letters, especially in the fall. Help me keep things straight by writing some instructions for me in one or two pages. Briefly list (1) your name, (2) the letter’s ideal due date, (3) a few talking points about you (see details below), (4) a very brief description of what you are applying for (including a list of specific schools you are applying to), and (5) a general characterization of who else is writing for you (e.g. “Other letters will come from my employer and from another political science professor.”).

Really important: Talking points. Include a list of 3-5 bullet points that you think I might want to address in my letter. Jog my memory of specific things that you have done really well under my watch, or a list of your attributes that you’d like me to mention. Come up with specific things I can mention—don’t just write “Hard worker,” but give an example of something specific you’ve done under my watch that I can use as an example of you working hard in difficult circumstances.

Really important: Submission instructions and signed waiver of access. Usually there is some sort of cover letter that you are supposed to sign that includes a waiver of your right to read my letter. For law school letters, that’s included in the LSAC form.

Really important: Stamped, addressed envelope. An envelope with postage paid (unless the letter will be submitted to a BYU address, such as for Washington Seminar). You don’t need to write my return address; I’ve got stickers for that.

The following materials are helpful but less critical than those listed above. Remember, the better I know you, the better my letter.

Grades. Your academic history. Just print it from Route Y.

Letter of intent (cover letter). If you are writing a cover letter or something similar to accompany your finished application, provide me with a copy (even if it’s a rough draft). Reading this helps me understand why you are trying to get into law school, graduate school, or whatever. I can write a better letter if I understand your motives.

Resume. A resume if you have one; not essential, but helpful.

Writing sample. Pick out the best paper that you wrote for one of my classes. Make me a copy of the graded version so that I can see what I wrote on your work.

My phone number is (801) 422-2182 and my email address is brown@byu.edu. My mailing address:

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