Getting Good Letters of Recommendation

So you’ve filled out the application, written and reviewed your resume and cover letter, bought a suit, and prepared to interview. What’s left in your job or graduate school application? If your GPA and transcript are indications of your intellectual horsepower, then your letters of recommendation are an indication of what you do with that horsepower. A good letter of recommendation can seal the deal, while a poor one could seriously harm your application. If your application does not call for letters of recommendation, you should still plan to have at least three names to provide as references for prospective employers when asked.

When choosing your references you should ask yourself:
- Do they know me well enough?
- Will they say good things about me?
- Are they reliable enough to respond to an employer or to write a letter of reference on time?

How To Ask:
- Make sure that you give the recommender enough time to complete the task. Generally, two weeks is a good minimum amount, although a month is preferable.
- Do ask for the recommendation in person, rather than email.
- Provide your recommender with a copy of your resume, cover letter, personal statement (if you have one), and the job description/a list of graduate school programs you are applying to.
- Provide them with addressed, stamped envelopes to mail the letters.
- Ask them to decline politely if they think they are too busy or don’t know you well enough to write a great letter of recommendation.

Who To Ask:
- Current or former employers
- Volunteer work supervisors
- Professors
- Advisers
- People who know you the best rather than those with high rank

Who Not To Ask:
- Friends of the family
- Famous people who know you socially
- Relatives
- Lecture professors who don’t know your name
- Highly disorganized people
- Professors who are always late returning your assignments
- Someone who is a poor writer
- Someone who might not say great things about you
Who Should Write It?
Some recommenders may ask you to write the letter for them, and they will sign it afterwards. This is a common practice, although possibly not the best option as the point of a letter of recommendation is to provide multiple perspectives on your abilities.

Waiving Your Rights
You may be asked on your application to waive your rights to view the recommendation letter. There are several reasons why you should waive your rights. It is generally assumed that recommendation letters will be more candid if your writers know the letter will be confidential. Furthermore, if you have chosen your references carefully, you know they will write you a good letter and there is no need for you to read it.

Thank You Letter
It is important to thank your recommender after they have written your letter. A handwritten note is best, as it is more personal and you already know the person well. The following is a sample thank you:

Dear Dr. Miller,
Thank you for agreeing to write a letter of recommendation on my behalf. Your recommendation is an invaluable part of my graduate school application. I will contact you periodically to let you know how my application process is going.
Sincerely,
Jane Q. Sample

Sample Recommendation Letter
Dear Members of the Search Committee:

As the Dean of Stonewell College, I have had the pleasure of knowing Hannah Smith for the last four years. She has been a tremendous student and an asset to our school. I would like to take this opportunity to recommend Hannah for your graduate program.

I feel confident that she will continue to succeed in her studies. Hannah is a dedicated student and thus far her grades have been exemplary. In class, she has proven to be a take-charge person who is able to successfully develop plans and implement them.

Hannah has also assisted us in our admissions office. She has successfully demonstrated leadership ability by counseling new and prospective students. Her advice has been a great help to these students, many of whom have taken time to share their comments with me regarding her pleasant and encouraging attitude. It is for these reasons that I offer high recommendations for Hannah without reservation.

Her drive and abilities will truly be an asset to your establishment. If you have any questions regarding this recommendation, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Roger Fleming
Dean of Stonewell College
Sample from: *Your Guide to Business School* by Karen Schweitzer
http://businessmajors.about.com/od/admissions/a/RecSample1.htm

For more information check out:
*Excerpt from The Ivey Guide to Law School Admissions* by Anna Ivey
http://businessmajors.about.com/od/recommendationletter1/a/RecExcerpt.htm

*UW – Milwaukee webpage on letters of recommendation for graduate school* by Chris Parks
http://www.uwm.edu/~ccp2/work/recletter.html