

## No. 88: Recommendation Letters

There comes a time in many students' careers that they will need recommendation letters. Competing for a scholarship. Applying for law school. Getting into graduate school. Seeking gainful employment. All of these activities require some third party evaluation of students. Here are some tips when it comes to seeking recommendation letters.

- **Who Matters?** It is generally better to be evaluated by a professor than a teaching assistant. The title "professor" and the initials "Ph.D." tend to carry more weight. This is not to say that our teaching assistants are not qualified. Quite the contrary – the UW Political Science Department recruits some of the best TA's around and we train them well. However, in academia reputation matters. Thus, even among professors, it is generally better to get a letter from a full professor than from an associate or assistant. A letter from an associate professor tends to carry more weight than an assistant as well. Also, getting letters from a nationally renown scholar is better than somebody who is relatively obscure – this is particularly true for graduate school, though it applies to the top-notch law schools as well. However, there is an important trade-off here as well. As one moves up the "food chain" of professors (from assistant to full), it becomes more difficult to get the attention of that professor, largely because one's duties increase with promotions. Famous scholars tend to be busy scholars as well. You need to think about this trade-off, and most importantly, give a professor ample time to write a letter.



- **What Matters? (Or "Getting To Know You!")** While bagging a "big name" scholar is important, it is equally important to have a detailed, high-quality letter. An unknown assistant professor could write a better letter than a famous scholar if he or she provides ample detail about your academic achievements and future career plans. This means choosing professors who actually know you; professors that you have had in small seminars or did an individual research project with. This implies several things:
  - ✓ Try to take at least one small seminar class during your time at the UW, preferably during your junior year (as most people ask for recommendations at the beginning of their senior year). Or try to work one-on-one with a professor on research, either theirs or your own.
  - ✓ Get to know your professors during office hours.
  - ✓ Participate in class (and that means attend class).

- **Be Prepared.** Even if you are not a scout, it is important to be prepared when requesting a letter of recommendation. It is usually best to ask a professor directly, usually during office hours or an appointment. Having your act together when you meet with your professor for the first time will make a positive impression. Come prepared with the following material:
  - ✓ *A statement of purpose.* Most law and graduate schools require a statement of purpose asking you to outline your preparation for further education and your future career goals. Bring in a draft of this statement. This will allow your professors to know you better. They might also have editorial suggestions
  - ✓ *An unofficial transcript.* Knowing what classes you took during your academic career and how you did will help a professor craft a more detailed letter. If there are some weak spots (e.g., you failed advanced microbiology), this could be explained away (e.g., “Calvin found out that a career in medicine wasn’t for him”).
  - ✓ *A short résumé.* Besides school, what other things have you done. It is particularly important to highlight internships, volunteer experience, extracurricular activities (e.g., student government) and work experience.
  - ✓ *Official forms, envelopes and stamps!* If possible, have any forms filled out in advance, preferably typed. You should also consider setting up a file at the UW’s Center for Career Services in Mary Gates Hall. This file costs about \$25 for 20 years. The benefit is that if you decide to go to graduate school five years after graduating, you can use the letter in your career file (since your professor may have forgotten the details about you). Bring the UW’s form with you when requesting a recommendation letter.
- **Stay In Touch.** Professors like to hear about the successes of their former students. If you get accepted to law or graduate school, or if you win the big scholarship, let your professor know. We measure our success by your success. (Also, if you go on to invent something that makes you really rich, don’t forget who got you there!)

