Instructions for Those Who Would Like Me to Write Letters of Recommendation

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So you have decided to apply to graduate school or need a letter of recommendation for a job. Good for you! I would like to do anything I can to help. But in order for me to write you a letter or provide a phone recommendation that will actually help you, you need to plan ahead and do some additional preparation. Before we get to specific instructions, please consider the following:

* Letter writers should have something constructive to say beyond observing that you are capable of following instructions or completing assignments on time. Virtually all letters of recommendation are positive, so a generically positive letter will not help you (and faint praise might even be considered to be negative). If you did not do very well in one or more of my classes, please consider carefully whether or not you want me to write a letter of recommendation. I will do my best to emphasize your talents and achievements, but I have to be honest when asked to compare you to other students, assess your readiness for graduate-level work, and discuss your ability to find novel solutions to difficult problems. I am also likely to be asked to comment on weaknesses.

* The strongest letters for admission to a graduate program generally will be from faculty, not from professional supervisors. This is because faculty know what words and phrases other faculty want to hear about prospective graduate students. Hopefully, you made a point of doing well in courses taught by faculty who can comment on your determination, creativity, maturity, and technical acumen.

* I and other faculty who may write your letters of recommendation are likely to be very busy, particularly during the time when your letters are due. In order for us to write positive letters and get them submitted on time, you need to plan ahead, provide clear and concise instructions, and follow up to make sure that the process moves smoothly.

With the above in mind, here are some guidelines and instructions, including information on timing. If you are not prepared to follow the guidelines and schedule below, please don't ask me for a letter of recommendation. When you contact me asking for letters, you will be asked to confirm that you have read the guidelines below and are prepared them. Please take your time to read this information carefully. This information (or something close to it) is likely to apply to other letter writers as well.

The information below is focused on applications to graduate school, but many of the concepts also apply to applications for professional employment.

(1) When you contact me to ask me for a letter or letters of recommendation, please tell me your full name (remind me of your last name when you were a student if it has changed), which class(es) you took with me, quarter and year when you were enrolled in my class(es), and when
you graduated from UCSC. Applications for graduate school are generally due in late December to early February. **You should begin talking to me and other potential recommenders no later than October or early November** in order to assess who will be available to write the most positive letters. It would be much better if you checked in during the spring or summer before letters are due, so that you can plan your schedule accordingly.

**NOTES:**

* If you want to talk to me about what schools to apply to, please suggest several days/times when we might speak in person or by phone, or show up during regular office hours. This will be a conversation, not a list of programs in response to an email. This conversation will be most useful if we have it 3+ months ahead of the date when you ask me for letters of recommendation, so you have a chance to do some research, consider your academic and career goals, make initial contacts by email and phone, etc.

* Please do some preparation before you contact me. Look into several potential graduate programs, find out about entrance requirements, which faculty are doing what kind of research, coursework requirements, TA opportunities, etc. You should have some ideas about what kind(s) of program you might be looking for. Your approach should be simultaneously ambitious and realistic. For example, if you plan to apply to an engineering program, you should have taken (or plan to take) additional math, physics, programming or other technical courses, as engineering programs will expect. Be ready to talk about this with me and in preparing your application(s). Think about whether you want a M.S. or a Ph.D., whether you want a "science" program or a "studies" program, etc.

* If you want to list me as a reference on a job application, please give me an updated CV/resume, and **tell me about each job to which you are applying** so that I am not surprised by getting a phone call from someone in Human Resources.

(2) If you have been out of school for some time, you should tell me what you have been doing since you were enrolled as a student. In general, your application will be stronger if what you have been doing since graduation includes some technically and/or academically challenging work or studies. Please don't just send me a resume - please tell me what skills or expertise you have acquired that have helped you to prepare for graduate or professional work. Many former students stay in touch with prospective recommenders - a brief note once a year goes a long way towards demonstrating focus and a goal orientation, and it gives us something to talk about in letters that can be helpful in showing your commitment, determination, and ability to plan ahead.

(3) Once you have narrowed your list of schools (probably 4 to 8, 5-6 is common), you are ready to send a detailed request for letters of recommendation. At this point, I will have already agreed to write your letters (see step 1 above), and the next step is to provide information I'll need to get your letters written and submitted on time to the right programs. Please send me a neatly written list of programs for which letters are required. **For each program**, please indicate: (a) full name
of school, (b) full name of program (department, school, etc) and degree desired, (c) names of any faculty or other potential sponsors with whom you have corresponded or spoken, (d) date when your complete application is due, (e) date when my letter should be received, (f) explanation as to whether my letter will be submitted electronically or as hard copy, (g) complete address for each institution (even if electronic letter/form is to be used, as I'll need to put the address on letterhead). You should provide this information at least four (4) weeks in advance of your letter submission deadline(s).

NOTES:

* Send all of the above in a single email, either as text or as a single attachment. Please don't make me slog through multiple emails to find all of your materials. Also, please name any files you send as attachments in a way that makes them readily identifiable. A file called, "Letters.pdf" is not much help. Better to name the file, "LastName_RecLetterInfo_YYMMDD.pdf."

* I will be preparing a custom letter for each institution, sent directly from me, so please don't ask me to send you a single letter that you can use for all applications. Generic letters are virtually worthless, as are letters that originate with the applicant.

* I don't need stamped envelopes for hard copy letters; just be sure to provide the complete mailing address, including name of person to whom letter should be directed, if any.

* Some institutions have a hard copy form that must be completed, so be sure to provide this if necessary. Others want letters on letterhead with answers to specific questions. Make sure I know about what questions should be addressed.

(4) I will be able to write better letters if you give me copies of your (draft) application materials. Ideally these will be attached to the email discussed in step (3), but you could also follow up with a (single) additional email/letter containing this information. Your draft application will help me to focus my letter, using words that connect your achievements and goals to the specific programs to which you are applying. One draft application will usually be sufficient, unless you are applying to widely varying programs (e.g., M.S. in Hydrology and Ph.D. in Ecology). You can send me a resume if you think I need to see it to write a proper letter, but I really should have a look at your draft application. You can send me other documents as well, as you wish, but please avoid sending multi-megabyte attachments unless there is a very good reason. You should provide this information at least three (3) weeks in advance of your letter submission deadline(s).

NOTE:

* Unless I have a lot of lead time and am unusually unobligated, I am not likely to be able to comment on your application (edit, provide suggestions). Of course, the more I know about you prior to receiving your request (e.g., as a lab assistant,
having had you in multiple classes, you being a frequent visitor during office hours, etc.), the more likely I am to find time to comment on your application essays. But you can always ask.

(5) Many institutions that use electronic submission systems will send an email prompt to your recommenders. However, this prompt will not be sent out in some cases until your application is complete, or until you reach a point in the application process where recommendation letters are requested (e.g., might require that you upload draft application materials). **This can create a problem for your letter writers** if you attempt to submit your application at the last minute and need your recommenders to follow up immediately with their letters. Many faculty set aside blocks of time, perhaps 1-2 times per week, for preparation of letters of recommendation and other administrative tasks. If your application is submitted at the last minute, sparking an electronic request for a letter of recommendation for which there is little time available, there is a good chance that I and your other recommenders will not submit your letters in time. **This can result in rejection of your application!** You may not worry about meeting the application deadline at the last minute, but I may be trying to prepare many other letters (I did >60 in the last round of applications) and have other deadlines that require my immediate attention. Because application deadlines often occur close to AGU, near the end of the Fall quarter, close to the winter vacation period, and/or near the start of Winter quarter, there is the real possibility that I may be unable to meet your deadline even if you warn me well in advance. In order to avoid a scheduling problem, I **should receive the electronic prompt to submit your letters (having already received all other information needed to do so) at least two (2) weeks in advance of the letter submission deadline.** In fact, it would be better if I had the prompt and all necessary information **three (3) or four (4) weeks in advance**, particularly if this occurs over the holiday break.

(6) Please follow up by reminding me, perhaps 3-4 days ahead of each deadline for letter submission, that a letter is due. I don’t mind being reminded. I generally put letters of recommendation on my calendar/to-do list, with several days of buffer in case I run into scheduling problems. But sometimes I forget or there is confusion about dates. For electronic submission of letters, you should receive confirmation when my letter is submitted.

**NOTE:**

* There may be a good reason why you need to request an "emergency" letter with just a few days notice. **Being unprepared until the last minute is not a good reason.** You can ask for a rapid letter, but I may be unable to comply, and you might get a nasty-gram in response.

If, after reading all of the above, you would like me to write you a letter of recommendation (or several), please get to work identifying programs of potential interest and make your initial request to me, step (1) in the list above.

**Please include this phrase in your email to me requesting letters:**
"I have read the information on letters of recommendation at your web site and will follow the instructions carefully, paying particular attention to providing complete information in a timely way."

A final note: You are not asking for a "favor" when you request a letter of recommendation. Writing these letters is part of my job, and I get genuine pleasure in helping former students to find the right graduate program or get going with their careers.

I'm looking forward to helping you to achieve your academic and professional goals. Please be sure to let me know how it all works out!