



RECOMMENDATIONS AND REFERENCES

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE YOUR RECOMMENDERS?

Ask someone who knows you well, who can speak about your experience related to the position or graduate program to which you are applying. Letters are best if they are from people who are in a position to evaluate your work, rather than from those who may have a higher title. cursory letters from significant people (e.g. a letter from the Senator in whose office you interned) are often much less useful in making your case than letters from people who actually know your day to day work (e.g. the Legislative Assistant for whom you actually worked).

In choosing your recommenders for graduate school applications, remember that above all, graduate admissions committees are evaluating your potential as a student and scholar and they typically prefer a recommendation from a faculty member. When in doubt, you can always ask the program or employer their preference. When choosing a faculty reference, this would typically be a faculty member you have had for more than one class, or if only one class, at least a recent one where you were very actively engaged. A faculty member who has been in a position to supervise your research is ideal.

HOW DO YOU ENSURE GOOD LETTERS AND REFERENCES?

From the beginning of your time at Swarthmore, understand that it is important to build and maintain positive relationships with faculty and administrators at the College. Talk with faculty about your interests during their office hours and ask for their advice. If applying to graduate school in a field related to your major, programs expect the majority of your references to come from your major department. If you don't have these references many programs will be concerned about your potential as a graduate student.

Schedule appointments with faculty and administrators to discuss your future plans and ask if they know alumni you should contact who work in related fields. Get a campus job -- work hard and take initiative. Campus supervisors can often provide excellent references to future employers eager to evaluate your work performance.

*One of the main things a future employer, graduate program or professional school wants to know about is the student's character--did the student hand in things on time, work well with others, work responsibly with equipment, share resources with others, leave messes for others to clean up, follow safety regulations? Was the student honest and reliable? In the sciences we would say, was this student a good lab citizen?
-- Sara Hiebert Burch, Biology*

HOW DO YOU ASK FOR A LETTER OR REFERENCE?

Ask potential recommenders if they can provide a strong and positive reference on your behalf. While this may be awkward, it's the best way to ensure against a lackluster letter written only because the recommender doesn't want to say no. Give recommenders a graceful way to say no if needed, asking them if they feel they know you and your work well enough to provide a strong reference.

Some employers simply require reference lists -- before listing any individual make sure you ask her/him. If the person agrees, ask your recommender what information she/he would need from you to provide the reference and how she/he would like to be contacted by the organization seeking the reference. Provide your recommender with the following:

- your resume or CV; and personal statement if applicable
- the name of the programs to which you are applying, due date (and time) for each and how each program requires the recommendation to be submitted (e.g. online, e-mailed, or mailed)
- the general types of job opportunities to which you'll apply; update the reference with the specific positions to which you've been invited for an interview

Schedule an appointment with your recommenders to discuss the programs or opportunities to which you are applying -- your recommenders will want to know what to emphasize in their recommendations and this information will be helpful as they attempt to connect your performance in their class (or workplace) with your plans for your future.

Tell your recommenders your timeline (**allow them at least 3 weeks** if you are asking them to write a recommendation letter) and ask if they can meet the deadline. Giving your recommender insufficient time to write a recommendation letter may reflect poorly on your time management skills and could result in a recommendation that is not as strong as you would hope.

Remember that it takes a lot of time for a faculty member to write an effective letter. Once the basic letter is written, be sure to allow sufficient time when asking for a follow-up letter for a different opportunity. Many faculty members like to tweak their letters to make them specific to the opportunity for which you are applying. Be thoughtful of how many letters you may be asking one individual to write.

Always notify your references **each time** you list them on your graduate/professional school or internship/employment applications. Provide them with a description of the opportunity or program you are applying to as well as an updated resume.

If you are requiring your recommenders to mail their letters, be very organized about this process and provide them with stamped and addressed envelopes as well as multiple copies of any forms that are needed.

KEEP IN TOUCH WITH YOUR RECOMMENDERS

This is especially pertinent if you do not plan on asking for recommendations before graduation. By keeping in touch with your recommenders after you graduate (or after you have worked for them in an internship, for example), it will help jog their memory of you when you ask them for recommendations later. Realize that some faculty write over 100 recommendations annually! Send an e-mail when requesting a letter of recommendation with all the pertinent details and ask the faculty member if anyone else should be copied on your request (e.g. the departmental administrative assistant). Ask your recommender how she/he would prefer to handle reminders if they become necessary.

AT WHAT POINT SHOULD A FORMER STUDENT NO LONGER RELY ON UNDERGRAD COLLEGE PROFESSORS FOR REFERENCES?

If you've had experience after graduation, realize that employers will expect to speak with your current and former supervisors. In this case, faculty at Swarthmore may not be the most relevant reference to list and certainly won't be in a position to talk about your post-grad work performance as an employee. If you are applying to graduate or professional school many years after graduation and you are seeking a faculty member's reference, be sure to ask if the faculty member feels comfortable writing the recommendation letter and update her/him on recent happenings in your life, including why you are pursuing an advanced degree. Send her/him an updated copy of your resume -- it might also be helpful to send a paper you wrote for her/his class so she/he can remember the quality of your work.

HOW CAN CAREER SERVICES HELP?

Career Services maintains files for students and alumni containing letters of recommendation. The first letter we receive for a student creates his/her file. These letters can then be sent to employers and graduate schools at the student's request.

RELEASING LETTERS FROM YOUR FILE

The law states that a student's written request must be provided to release letters from your file. In Career Services you will find our [Recommendation Release Form](#) which simplifies the request process. Students/alums submit this signed form to the Career Services office for processing.

Requests will be processed within two business days. Career Services is able send hard copy by mail, scanned copies via email or faxed copies as specified on your request for mailing form. Please allow enough time for your request to be processed to arrive in good time. Career Services is unable to visit any online application site on behalf of a recommender. In cases where online web form is requested, the recommender complete any online recommendation

REQUESTING A RECOMMENDATION BE WRITTEN FOR YOUR FILE

When requesting that a professor/employer write a recommendation on your behalf, we recommend using our [Recommendation Form](#). This form includes a waiver of access which, once signed, indicates that the letter must remain confidential. Letters can be placed in your file without a signed waiver form. Graduate schools may assume letters without a waiver have not been kept confidential. Confidentiality is required by graduate schools.

KNOW THE CONTENTS OF YOUR FILE

It is up to you to know what is in your Recommendation file. You can log into SwatCareers at any time to check the contents of your file. All letters received are recorded in your *SwatCareers* profile. To obtain your *SwatCareers* login or have a staff member check the contents of your file, contact Career Services.

Letters of recommendation will always be kept on file and you may continue to add to your file after you graduate. Be mindful, however, that letters lose some usefulness after five years or so. Should future needs for these letters arise, you may want to ask the writers to update the recommendation or get new ones from current employers or professors.