

## Asking me for a letter of recommendation

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Writing letters is an important part of my job, and I take it seriously. We share the same goal, namely, that I write the best possible letter for you. As Ravi Vakil writes about this: *it is in your interest to make my job as easy as possible*. I generally do not meet students about letters, and prefer for requests to come by email. What follows is a list of the three main things I need, and some guidelines on what is most helpful to me as your letter writer.

1. *Due date/time*. The first thing I need is a clear list of all the places you need your letter uploaded/sent along with the earliest due date (including time of day). You should not expect that your letter will be finished before that time. You are welcome to request an earlier date, but also make it clear when the actual due date is. Finally, it's a good idea to send me a gentle reminder a week before the (preferred) due date (but no need to resend links).

2. *What you are applying for*. Include the name of the program and a brief description of it. If there is a web page about the program that describes it in more detail and/or describes what specifically the selection committee will look for in a letter, send that as well.

3. *Materials*. The most important thing I need is material from you is your raw material. The general principle here is: If you want me to say it in the letter, it should be sent to me in an easy-to-digest way. I'll discuss more specifics below, for academic letters and undergraduate letters. There are other categories, but the same general principles apply.

*Academic letters*. The most useful thing is a list of publications with abstracts. These abstracts should not be the abstracts from the papers themselves. Rather, they should be specifically targeted for a letter writer, pointing to the aspects you want me to notice (What is surprising about the paper? What techniques does it use? How does it fit into the broader narrative of your research? etc.) A well-written research statement can also work, but those should be written for a more general audience, and generally would need to be tweaked for the purposes of a letter writer.

It is usually not possible for me to read and understand all of your papers myself in the time I have to work on your letter. Even if I did, you are better off if I spend that time crafting the letter instead of poring through your papers trying to understand them from scratch.

*Undergraduate letters*. If you are an undergraduate from my linear algebra course and are applying for a summer internship or tutoring position, it is helpful if you remind me as much as possible who you are and what made you stand out in my class. Did you come to every office hour? Did you do poorly on the first exam and then ace the final? Did you do a particular writing assignment or homework that was impressive (if, so please send!). I try my best to remember the many students I have each year, but I might forget something important. If you do not explicitly remind me, it is likely that your letter will consist of a description of the course, plus a recitation of your grades in the various components of the course.