Letter of Recommendation Advice

If you are interested in having me write you a letter of recommendation, understand that I write letters for students only if they get at least a B in one of my courses. If you are doing well in my class and this is your first one with me, I will write you a letter. Second, you need to provide me with a CV, a summary of your noteworthy academic achievements, and the necessary forms (and don’t forget to sign the forms). In general, I ask that you give me a few weeks to write the letter. While there is a lot of boilerplate in every recommendation letter, I try to write a unique one for each student. This is why you need to give me your academic CV and at least two to three weeks.

Undergraduate letters: In general, I write the best letters for students who have done well in my courses and who I know personally. Graduate schools and employers want to know that you are smart and mature. I can tell if you are smart from your course work, but I can only comment on your maturity if I know you in some context outside of the lecture hall. This includes office hours and independent study. So keep this in mind when you ask me for a letter.

Graduate student letters: The same applies to grad students – I can write an effective letter only if I know you beyond the seminar room – but there is more you should know. While class performance is an adequate basis of evaluation for fellowships and grants, I need to know you better to help you get a quality post-doctoral or faculty position. You can get to know me by coming to office hours to discuss your research, putting me on your dissertation committee (if appropriate), or working with me as a teaching assistant, research assistant, or co-author. Hopefully, by the time you finish your dissertation, I will come to appreciate your finer points!

Graduate students seeking letters for travel grants and fellowships should provide me with a CV and copies of their best work. Students going on the job market will need to give me a CV, published articles and working papers, sample dissertation chapters, and evidence of outstanding teaching. To facilitate the process, you should also provide a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with the addresses of all the schools and programs you are applying to.

Ideally, you should discuss your plans with me the year before you go on the job market because successful candidates need to show progress on the dissertation and the potential to publish. Thus, you need to have something done by the time you request a letter from me – and you can imagine that this takes a while to pull off. That way, by the time you go on the market, I can in good faith say wonderful things about you.