

# Letters of Recommendation

PDCO Career Resources

Letters of recommendation are a central component of every academic job search. They provide search committees with assurance from respected, established faculty in your field that you will be a productive and collegial colleague, and that you will be able to achieve the research and teaching objectives you set out in your application materials. Strong letters of recommendation will strengthen a well-constructed application and make search committees feel more certain that you will be a 'good fit' for their department. Weak or uninformed letters can ruin an otherwise strong application and cause search committees to question whether or not you will be capable of performing your job effectively. It is in your best interest, then, to think carefully about who would be able to write well-informed and enthusiastic letters on your behalf.

## Who should you ask for letters of recommendation?

Each academic job application will typically require **3-5 letters** of recommendation. Make a ranked list of 6-7 faculty who you think would be willing to write you advantageous letters. Plan ahead and ask your preferred letter writers well in advance (at three months prior to the start of your job search) to ensure that they will have the time to write you the best possible letters. In short, do not wait- finalize your recommenders as early as possible!

You should ask for letters from people best qualified to speak to your research and your teaching potential as a faculty member at the institution(s) to which you are applying. Aim for balance in who you ask to write for you: If you are applying to a research-focused institution, you will want to have at least two letters that speak to your innovations and contributions as a researcher, with one letter describing your teaching potential. If you are applying to a teaching-focused institution, you will want to have two letters that primarily speak to your abilities as an instructor and one that speaks to your research trajectory. A letter from someone outside of your dissertation committee (your postdoctoral PI, perhaps), is helpful in encouraging search committees to think of you more as a young peer or early-career scholar rather than as a student.

At this stage in your career, you should certainly ask both your postdoctoral PI and your dissertation advisor for letters of recommendation, if possible. It is expected for faculty advisors to write letters for their students and promote their career interests, so do not be nervous about asking for their assistance. These recommenders will be best apprised of the nuances of your research and will be able to effectively describe your contributions to your field. They will also be able to affirm that you are an independent research scientist and that your proposed research at your new institution arises from your own ideas- not theirs. Search committees will be concerned if your current PI and/or dissertation advisor are unwilling to write letters on your behalf. Even if you have a tumultuous professional relationship with your PI and/or dissertation advisor, try to work with them to see if they will write a letter for you. If you are unable to have

your postdoc PI or dissertation advisor write for you, make sure to explain why in your cover letter.

It is acceptable to ask prestigious scholars from outside of your university to recommend you for academic positions. Keep in mind that while the prestige of writer recommending you is important, their knowledge of you and your work needs to be more than cursory. A well-constructed letter written by an emerging star in your field with whom you are well acquainted may carry more weight than that of a prestigious scholar who will write you a generic letter. Make sure to think carefully about how well your potential letter writers know you and how invested they are in your work before asking them to write a recommendation.

When you write to request a letter of recommendation from a faculty member, especially from individuals who are not your PI or dissertation advisor, be sure to give them a sense of why you are asking them to write a letter on your behalf. If you are writing to a prestigious mentor in your field, for example, you might say: "You have an intimate knowledge of my research and can effectively speak to its influence on the wider field in a letter of recommendation." Or if you were a TA for a professor you might say: "Because I was your TA in your course on genetics, I thought you would be able to speak to my potential as an instructor in a letter of recommendation in my upcoming job search."

Be understanding if someone declines to write a letter for you. You want faculty to write for you who will have the time and the investment in your career to write you an effective and convincing letter. Thank the individual for their time and consideration and move to the next potential recommender on your list.

### **How do I help my recommenders write the best possible letters of recommendation?**

Provide your writers with the materials they need to construct a well-informed letter. This will include your application materials (curriculum vitae, cover letter, research statement, teaching statement, course transcript), copies of publications, and a job description for each position you are applying for.

Have a conversation with your letter writers in person or via Skype. Start by talking with your PI and dissertation advisor. Bring attention to specific achievements or publications you want your writers to mention in their letter for you. If you want your writer to highlight your research in their letter, make sure to say so. If your writer has a knowledge of your teaching philosophy and pedagogical approach, ask them to demonstrate this in their letter.

Keep a schedule of application due dates and the manner in which your writers should submit each of their letters (upload link, e-mail, snail mail)

- Just as your application materials need to be tailored to each position you are applying for, your letter writers need an appropriate amount of time to tailor each letter they write for you to the institution you are applying to
- Inform your letter writers as early as possible about the institutions you are planning to apply to, with deadlines for each application and specific instructions about how they can submit their letters
- Send gentle reminders about due dates (along with submission instructions) to your recommenders in the weeks before applications are due

### **After application season**

Express gratitude to your letter writers after your applications are submitted. Send them handwritten notes or a personalized e-mail thanking them for their time and diligence in helping you apply for academic positions. If you are successful on the job market, get back in touch with your writers to share your good news! They will appreciate hearing from you.

### **Resources**

- 'Academic Job Search: Letters of Recommendation' ([Click Here](#))
- 'Dos and Don'ts for the Academic Job Search: Letters of Recommendation' ([Click Here](#))
- 'Educating Your Letter Writers About Your Academic Brand' ([Click Here](#))
- 'The Professor Is In: The Three Recommendation Letters You Must Have' ([Click Here](#))
- 'Writing a Letter of Recommendation' ([Click Here](#))