

REQUESTING A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

Advice and mechanics

Scott F. H. Kaplan

If you would like to ask me for a letter of recommendation or to serve as a reference, **please read this document first**. In it, I try not only to lay out the actions and responsibilities of which you should be aware, but I also dispense a bit of advice about the process. The advice, I hope, save both of us time and reduce our stress.¹

1 Asking

Recommendation letters can be **the** difference in making your application stand out amongst a swarm of applications boasting similar track records both in and out of class. A professional (academic or industrial) who can attest to what it is like to work with you is a significant statement that is likely to be given real weight by those evaluating your case. So choose your recommenders well. Pick not only a professional who can recommend you strongly, but also one who is likely to express that recommendation well. Good commentary from a poor writer is not going to help your case.

1.1 Whether

Should you ask me for a recommendation? Keep in mind that I must write about you based on my experiences with you. If you took a class with me and rarely spoke, with me or with others, within or outside of class, then I will have little that I can say about you. Consider also the quality of our interactions. Did you take on a significant project (e.g., a special topics course, a research project) but then failed to follow through on the work? Did I have to coerce and induce you through each step, or did you take over the project and drive it yourself? Did you heed my advice, or did you wander into the territory about which I warned you? Did you infuse me and others with enthusiasm for the project, or did you wear it like Jacob Marley's chains?

You likely know the answers to these questions, so be honest with yourself about what raw material you've given me for writing this recommendation. If the raw material seems good, and if you believe that I express myself well to others, then I am likely a good candidate for writing a strong recommendation letter for you.

1.2 When

I'm busy. I am happy to be busy, because it often means that I am surrounded by students who, of their own volition, signed on to take a class or to do research with me, giving me a chance to interact with them about wonderful and compelling ideas, and getting to know each of them better. My job is an outstanding one to have, so *busy-ness* is not a complaint. Nonetheless, I have little free time, and let's be frank: organization is not my strong suit.

Therefore, it is to your benefit to ask me for a recommendation **at least two weeks in advance** of the earliest deadline for which that letter must be submitted. If you ask me for a letter with less than

¹I can dream, can't I?

two weeks lead-time, I might say no, simply because I may not be able to fulfill the responsibility in a timely fashion. Giving me at least two weeks, and preferably three or four, ensures that I can submit a carefully written letter of recommendation well within the given deadline(s).

1.3 How

Never ask someone, “Will you write a recommendation for me?” In asking the question in that fashion, you leave open the possibility that the person will write a tepid letter, damning you with faint praise and thus harming your application, all without you even knowing it. Yes, each potential recommender should be frank with you about whether the letter she will write is a strong one, but some recommenders are not so forthright.

So, you should always ask, “Will you write a strong/positive/enthusiastic letter of recommendation for me?” By doing so, you make clear that you do **not** want this person to write a letter of recommendation for you if he has any reservations about making it a positive recommendation. You give the recommender an easier opening to respond uncertainly, making clear to you that this person may not be a good choice to write a letter for you.

Be sure to ask me properly. If you don’t, then I’ll know that you haven’t read this document.²

2 Managing

There is more to letters of recommendation than simply asking for them to be written. Often, you are applying to multiple jobs/programs/internships, and it is important that I, as your recommender, keep track of all of the destinations to which these letters must be sent. It is your job to arrange this organization for me.³

2.1 Before

Once I have agreed to provide a letter of reference, you will begin to prepare the applications proper. Each is likely to require you to provide information about each of your recommenders. Below is the information you need about my name, title, position, and contact information. For each application, **whenever it is possible for you to fill in this information about me, you should do so.** Please do **not** leave me the additional task of filling in such details for any application in which you can do so.

²It’s just like the removal of the brown M&M’s from Van Halen’s backstage dressing room before a show—a canary-in-the-coal-mine that indicates that procedure has not been carefully followed. And you just thought they were being primadonna’s, didn’t you?

³In the pre-digital era, the story was the same. You would present your recommender with a packet that included instructions for each application, pre-stamped and addressed envelopes for mailing each, and a cover sheet that listed each application’s destination and deadline. What I present below is a digital version of the same, and not some new burden because I’m lazy and disorganized.

My contact information:

- **Name:** Professor Scott F. H. Kaplan
- **Title/position:** Professor of Computer Science
- **Department:** Department of Computer Science
- **Institution:** Amherst College
- **Mailing address:**

Prof. Scott F. H. Kaplan
Dept. of Computer Science
Box #2239
Amherst College
Amherst, MA 01002-5000

- **Email address:** sfkaplan@cs.amherst.edu
- **Telephone number:** 413-542-2377
- **Web home page:** <https://www.cs.amherst.edu/~sfkaplan>

Once you have selected the programs to which you are going to apply and filled out their applications, you must then **prepare the following materials for me**, paying close attention to the **document naming scheme** that I provide:

1. Login to AC Apps (a.k.a. Google Docs for Amherst College) with your **college login**. For more on how to accomplish this task (if you've not used it before), see the IT page on AC Apps.
2. Create a new spreadsheet. If your name were (for example) *Edsger W. Dijkstra*, making your email address/username, say, *edijkstra15*, then name it *edijkstra15-rec-sheet*. It will be saved to your Google Drive for your AC Apps account.
3. In this spreadsheet create a column each for the following:
 - **Destination:** The school/business/program/institution name.
 - **Program:** The name of the specific program or job to which you are applying.
 - **Mailing address:** The physical mailing address to which this letter is going. Keep in mind that although the recommendation is likely to be submitted electronically, formal letters still often carry a mailing address.
 - **Electronic submission URL/information:** The email address or web site that I must use to submit the letter (and any other materials) electronically. Some applications will, instead, require you to fill out information about your recommenders, and will then directly send me an email that contains the submission link. You should indicate, within the spreadsheet, that just such an email will be forthcoming for any such program.

- **Due date:** The date by which I am expected to have this letter submitted.
 - **Email contact:** The email address at this institution should I have questions.
 - **Program information:** A URL to a site or document that describes what you are applying to.
4. Fill in the spreadsheet, of course, with one row per application/letter.
 5. Go to your Google Drive page, select this spreadsheet, and **share it with me** at my college email address (`sfkaplan@amherst.edu`). Be sure to give me permission not only to see the spreadsheet, but also to modify it so that I can mark off the ones that are completed. Doing so also allows you to verify that I'm getting the letters submitted on time.
 6. Upload, to this Google Drive account, any supporting documents that I should have in order to complete your letter. For example, a PDF of your unofficial transcript (named `edijkstral5-transcript`) from ACData may be appropriate; likewise, if you must write some kind of statement for any or all of the applications (e.g., a research statement for graduate programs, named `edijkstral5-research-statement`), upload that as well.
 7. As above, select and share with me at `sfkaplan@amherst.edu` any such supporting documents. These I need only access to view.

With this spreadsheet and supporting documents, I should have, in a nicely organized and easily accessible format, everything I need to write a proper and thoughtful letter about our work together. Please take time, therefore, to organize the documents well. Name things descriptively, format the spreadsheet thoughtfully, and generally put me in the right frame of mind to write for you a well crafted, equally organized and appealing letter.

2.2 During

The bulk of your work is done, but you should visit our shared spreadsheet periodically to see if due dates are approaching for letters that I seem not yet to have marked as submitted. Specifically, for each letter that I submit, I will strike through the corresponding row in our shared spreadsheet as an indication that the given application has been completed. For some applications, you may be able to determine, online, whether my letter has been received through the application's web site itself.

Do this kind of follow-up. If I claim to have submitted the letter (by marking the spreadsheet row as *done* with the strike-through), then check, if you are able, that the letter has indeed been uploaded to the appropriate website (or whatever mechanism is provided). If I haven't submitted a letter, a polite but firm reminder to me, in person or via email, is always appropriate and welcomed. I should, of course, do my job without the need for you to organize my actions, and I will endeavor to be reliable, but these are your applications, and you should do your best to verify that this delegated work is being done on your behalf in a timely manner.

You may, in the middle of this process, find additional targets for your applications. If you do so, you must (a) add the needed information to the shared spreadsheet and documents, and (b) send

me an email explicitly indicating that you've added additional application targets to which I should pay attention. As usual, do your best to give me time to handle such additions; the full two weeks may not be needed if I've already written the letter for at least one target, but at least a few days time to tailor one more letter is necessary.

2.3 After

Old-school manners induce some students to send a card as a *thank you* after the process is done. I'm lousy at such old-fashioned niceties, so I do not hypocritically expect such a thing from you (although your parents may have raised you to be better mannered than I am, and so I would receive such thanks with gratitude).

What you **should** do, however, is one final follow-up on that spreadsheet. Are all of the letters in? Are you sure that you listed every one of your applications on it? If you added any targets in the middle of the process, were they all handled?

3 Revisiting

If I've written a letter for you before, then you may, in some subsequent semester or year, ask me for a letter again.⁴ If so, most of the above steps should be followed.

Do keep in mind, however, that updating an existing letter is most often a simple task compared to crafting the original. You should feel free, therefore, to amortize my previous work and ask again later if you feel that my past letters may have helped you. I am almost always willing and happy to repeat the recommendation process with someone for whom it is already familiar.

I hope that this document proves helpful in organizing your applications, organizing my role in these processes, removing ambiguity, and keeping me on the ball. I welcome suggestions for making this interaction better, so feel free to let me know what you think.

⁴You even may find yourself asking for a letter for recommendation many years after your graduation. Life can lead you in funny directions sometimes.