

HELPFUL GUIDELINES FOR A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

Whether applying for a job, an advanced degree program, or in this case a scholarship, you will need a Letter of Recommendation (and often more than one).

WHO YOU ASK MATTERS

This document should be written by someone in your life who can attest to your excellence and expertise. Students should first look to current or past employers or supervisors. These individuals are familiar with a student's work ethic and ability to handle tasks under pressure. Professors/teachers and academic advisors are also great resources, especially when applying to a more advanced academic program. Most importantly, the person writing the letter must know the student well enough to accurately describe their abilities and passions while describing them in the best light.

“The most important thing about choosing someone to write a letter of recommendation is that the person writing the letter must know the student well enough to accurately describe their abilities and passions while describing them in the best light.”

WHAT THEY WRITE MATTERS

If you've identified who may be the best person (or persons) to write a letter on your behalf, the next step is to be sure to request your letter in a timely manner and share guidelines with them. Here are five tips for a Letter of Recommendation:

- 1. DEMONSTRATE RELATIONSHIP:** The letter should describe the relationship between the writer and the student. Before getting into strengths and traits, the writer should first state how long he or she has known the student and how they became acquainted. This provides credibility regarding the relationship and answers the question of why he or she is able to offer expertise about the student.
- 2. INCLUDE EXAMPLES:** The writer should provide specific examples of the student's abilities, desire to learn, and work ethic. Recommendations are valuable because they give the reader a chance to learn about the student beyond their test scores and achievements. Recalling specific times when the student excelled in a particular role or class helps the reader get a clearer understanding of them.
- 3. BE SPECIFIC:** The writer should stay away from vague wording and phrases. The goal is to make this recipient stand out from the crowd. It's best to avoid cliches. Instead, be sure to describe the student's traits, abilities, experience, and character through thoughtful examples and personal anecdotes.
- 4. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE:** The student should be sure to inform the writer of the intent of the letter - *is it for a scholarship, a special program, or an employment opportunity?* The writer should be sure to take the criteria for the specific job, school, program, or award into account. For example, if a student is hoping to attend a school that specializes in engineering, or is applying for a 'major-specific' scholarship, focus on skills and experiences that relate to that discipline.
- 5. KNOW YOUR SUBJECT:** Recommendations are meant to individualize the student by speaking to their unique skills and qualities. Students should ask those who they can be sure know them well and are able to articulate it in written form. Likewise, if the writer does not feel confident that he or she knows the student well enough to provide specific examples, it's ok to be honest about it and encourage the student to find a better option.

CHECK OUT THE FLIP SIDE FOR AN EXAMPLE



EXAMPLE - LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

In this particular example, the author of the letter is writing it for a student who is applying for employment. You can see she explains relationship - how she is connected to this student and why she has the ability to provide an evaluation of the student's experience, knowledge, skills and abilities, performance, work ethic, and character. She is also able to speak to how all of that is applicable toward what the student is applying for. It is especially helpful when the person writing the letter can make those connections on the student's behalf, painting a clear picture for those evaluating the candidate.



October 1, 2025

Dear Mr. Evans,

It is a great pleasure to recommend Sarah for the marketing position with Cooper Agency.

I was Sarah's instructor for multiple marketing classes during her MBA program at the University of North Carolina. During our time together, Sarah displayed creativity, wit, and passion toward her work, and she will be a valuable asset to any team.

Sarah's knowledge of advertising and marketing strategy exceeded classroom expectations and carried over into practical settings. Alongside a group of other graduate students, she was pivotal in developing a marketing strategy for an upcoming local restaurant, which proved to be a great success.

With a focus on how social media advertising influences consumer behavior, she led her team in developing a strategy that emphasized the importance of eating local. The campaign outlined the positive community effects and the health benefits of eating locally grown food. During this time, Sarah displayed natural leadership skills and her ability to work in team settings.

Along with her creativity and leadership skills, Sarah is a delightful coworker. While working through her thesis, she constantly rearranged her schedule in order to accommodate mine and always came prepared with questions and insights to ensure our time was spent effectively. Sarah is organized and thoughtful in her approach, and she brings an infectious energy to her work. With these qualities, I am highly confident that Sarah will be a great asset to your team at Cooper.

If you need more information, please do not hesitate to contact me at 555-555-0150. I'd be happy to expand on my recommendation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katherine Winslow".

Katherine Winslow
Professor and Marketing Director
University of North Carolina



 **SCAN ME**
to learn more!

Adapted from
bestcolleges.com/resources/how-to-write-a-letter-of-recommendation
December 6, 2022

QUESTIONS? NEED MORE EXAMPLES?

Contact Andrea Gerhard
Director of Scholarships & Grants



217.429.3000
agerhard@heartofillinois.org

**SCHOLARSHIP
PORTAL OPEN**
**JANUARY 1, 2026
TO MARCH 1, 2026**
APPLY AT [HEARTOFILLINOIS.ORG](https://heartofillinois.org)