

Getting that GREAT Letter of Recommendation

BY MICHELLE BOUCHER

There is more to getting a great letter of recommendation than simply having good grades. If it were just about grades, you wouldn't need letters; your GPA would speak for itself! Schools and programs use letters of recommendation as a way to go beyond your grades and learn about you as a student and a person. They want to hear about your strengths and weaknesses to help them decide if you would be a good fit for their program.

When I write a letter of recommendation, I try to include as much information about a student as I can. Since letters of recommendation are meant to provide evidence that you will succeed in your desired program or job, the more examples about you that I can provide, the better your letter will be. It is not how much a professor likes you, but rather how well he or she knows you that makes the difference between an okay and a great letter.

A great letter of recommendation will highlight all the ways a student is a perfect fit for a program. It can also put into context any weaknesses that might appear in a transcript; if you struggled in a particular class or semester, a recommender can use this place to explain (with your permission) what happened or how that experience helped you grow into a better student. A letter of recommendation should leave the reader feeling as if he or she really knows the student. It can often be the deciding factor in determining acceptance to a program. So how can you get one of those great letters of recommendation?

Ask someone who knows you well

I cannot say it often enough: letters of recommendation are about more than how you scored on exams. Don't just ask faculty from your highest-scoring classes to write your letter. Ask someone who knows you and can really speak to your strengths and potential.

Be prepared and organized

When you ask for a letter of recommendation, make an appointment with your professor, and expect to spend a little time talking with him or her. Bring with you a list of your potential schools or programs. Good letters of recommendation include discussions as to why the student is applying for the specific job or program, so expect that your recommender will want to know why you have chosen the places you have. Be sure to prepare a list of important information, including deadlines and how the letter needs to be delivered. For example, is it a system that requires your recommender to send in the letter by e-mail, or do you need a paper copy to include in your materials? Does the recommender need to send the letter directly to the school or program? Some recom-

menders like reading admission essays before writing their letters, since it is another way to get to know you better. It would be a great idea to have your essay at least started before your meeting.

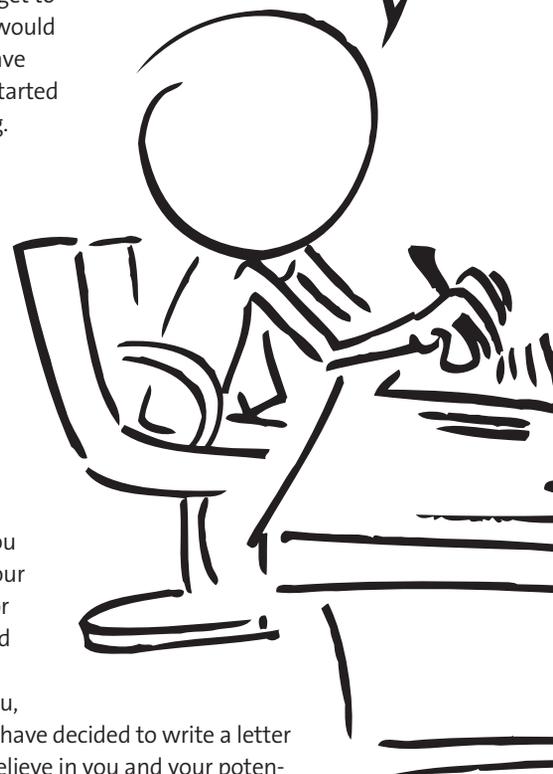
Start early

Hopefully you are starting to see that there is more to getting a good letter of recommendation than simply picking a person and sending them an e-mail. Start early — in fact, as early as you can! Approaching your professor a month or two (or more!) ahead of the deadline may seem too early to you, but it really isn't. If I have decided to write a letter for you, it means I believe in you and your potential to succeed in your desired program. I want to take the time needed to write the best letter I can, full of examples of your strengths and how well you would succeed. I might even want to have a follow-up meeting with you to ask for the details that I need to make a strong case for your acceptance to the program. Most professors can, if pressed, produce a letter in a much shorter time frame... but why rush them for something so important to you?

Be a good student

Don't skim past this paragraph! I know that this seems, well, obvious... but hear me out! When I say that you should be a good student, I mean more than simply aiming to earn good grades (which are, of course, very helpful). A good student is also interested in learning material that is above and beyond what is needed for the exam, and is also an active learner who demonstrates his or her interest in learning. Do you volunteer to answer questions? Do you

Of course I'll write you a recommendation. You're an awesome student.



From So-So to Great: Letters in Action

THE SO-SO RECOMMENDATION LETTER

A so-so letter of recommendation will try to be helpful but have very few examples or details, and usually will be very short. There are some standard phrases that show that the recommender is trying to be positive but has to stretch a few facts or impressions into a full letter. For this first letter, Millie Mole is a student who came to class and did reasonably well on her exams, but never asked or answered questions in lecture or lab, and had no other interactions with the professor or the department.

- “She seemed to be prepared for class and appeared to enjoy the subject matter.”
- “Millie works well with her partner in the laboratory section of the class, and I believe that she would function well in a team setting.”
- “From everything I know about your program, it seems likely that it would be a good fit for Millie.”
- “I have no reservations in recommending Millie Mole to your school.”

THE GREAT RECOMMENDATION LETTER

A great recommendation letter offers a number of specific examples to support the points the recommender is trying to make. When backed with details, the recommender can be a real advocate for the student and make a strong argument about why the student deserves to be considered for the program. For this second letter, Millie Mole is a student who was active in class, spent some time talking with her professor about her future plans, and was also involved in the department.

- “Millie Mole did very well in my class and was always completely prepared to engage the day’s material; she came ready to ask questions and reference the readings, and was quick to respond when I asked a question of the class. Millie worked hard outside of class and often attended my office hours to ask for clarification of a lecture point or get help on a particularly tough homework problem.”
- “Millie is a cheerful and helpful presence in the department, as well as being a natural leader. For example, Millie took the lead and organized an outreach event for the ACS student chapter. She dealt with the challenges of organizing a trip to a local second-grade class, including...”
- “Millie is also an effective tutor for the department, and twice a week she helps the general chemistry lecture students work through homework problems and teaches them with cheerful patience. Her experience with these students will transfer well into a graduate teaching assistantship position, and I know she will do well as a graduate student instructor.”
- “After performing research in our department for the past year, she understands the joys and challenges of laboratory work. Millie has been very successful in the laboratory and has learned a number of skills working on her project, including...”
- “Millie has spent a great deal of time considering her post-graduate plans, and is certain that she wants to attend your graduate school. From all our conversations about your program, I know that it would be a great fit for Millie since...”
- “I am delighted to recommend Millie Mole to your school, and I am certain that she will be a credit to your program.” **irc**

Thanks, Prof.
That means a
lot to me.

ask questions beyond the “will this be on the test” variety? Do you ever visit during your professor’s office hours? Are you interested in how the classroom material could be applied to real-life examples, and do you sometimes discuss these points with your professor? These interactions provide fantastic evidence, beyond just your GPA, that your recommender can use to prove that you are a good student.

Be involved

The more experience you have in your chosen field, the better the argument I can make that you’ll be successful in that field. It’s just common sense! Tutoring, being part of your ACS student chapter, doing research, attending talks on campus... there are lots of ways to be part of your departmental community. If you are involved with professional activities outside of campus (such as shadowing chemistry professionals, doctors, or pharmacists), be ready to talk

about these experiences with your letter writer. The more evidence about your suitability for the program or position, the better!

You might notice that many of the things that will help get you a good letter of recommendation are activities that will also tend to make you a better student and future chemist (or doctor or pharmacist). Absolutely correct! If you start early thinking about how to get that great letter of recommendation, chances are very good that you’ll become the type of student who gets those great letters. **irc**



Michelle Boucher is an associate professor of chemistry at Utica College. Between her roles as organic chemistry instructor and co-advisor of the Utica College ACS student chapter, she writes a great number of letters of recommendation each year.