

How to Get a Great Letter of Reference from a Teacher or Community member

Whether you're applying for a Canadian scholarship, a college in the United States or the SD33 financial awards program, chances are you'll need a letter of reference. These letters are usually required as part of the application process, and are written by the high school teacher of your choice.

These letters have different names and, depending on what you're applying for, they could have different objectives. Some letters are dry and focused only on your academic record. Others are more general, and also touch on your passion, adversity or character. No matter what it's called, it's important you put some serious thought into asking the right teacher.

In some cases, a letter of reference can make or break an application. So, here's a step-by-step guide to getting a great letter of reference from a teacher.

1) Read the fine print

There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all letter of reference. The criteria can (and likely will) be different for everything you apply for. The criteria will always tell you the kind of letter they want. Some university school applications, for example, only want academic proof that you're a good fit for that specific program – no fluff. The SD33 financial awards and on-line scholarships are less restrictive. They want to know about you and how you present yourself as a student and person, including traits like self-confidence, work ethic and integrity. Even before choosing who you want to write it, make sure you know what the application is looking for.

2) Find the best person for the job

Take time to really consider which teacher you want to write the letter of reference. You're basically asking, "Will you please speak on my behalf?" Some letters of reference will be a no-brainer: if you're applying for a biology program you'll want to ask a science teacher, not your English teacher.

It's the more general letter of reference for that requires serious thought. You'll want to ask a teacher who knows you well as a student. Think about a teacher with whom you have a great connection. I recommend students choose a teacher who has seen you at your most engaged and passionate in their class.

Once you've picked your No. 1 choice, choose a back-up teacher!

3) Ask in person a few months before deadline

Don't ask for a letter of reference via email! And don't wait until the deadline is a week away!

Meet face-to-face with that teacher and ask politely if they would write a letter of reference for you. An in-person meeting gives you a chance to remind them of all the great things about you that they can write about. It also gives you a chance to explain what it is you're applying for – they need to know that!

They might have a dozen other students who have asked for a letter of reference, too. The more time you give them, the better the letter-writer will feel about writing it for you.

Let them know that you will email them a Reference Resume (all the great things about yourself) to help them with the letter.

And there is a chance the teacher might say no. Maybe they have too many other letters to write or maybe they think there's a better teacher to write it. Don't be discouraged or offended. Listen to what they say and approach a back-up teacher.

4) Follow up right away

After you meet with a teacher, follow up with more information via email. Send them a link to scholarship you're applying for, or a link to the specific program, include your reference resume plus a reminder of your deadline.

5) Reach out as the deadline approaches

In 90% of cases, this step isn't necessary. But if you are 3 weeks away from deadline and have not received your letter yet, it is important to do.

6) Give thanks

Express your gratitude for your teacher's help. Writing a letter of reference is not a small or inconsequential task. It can take a teacher hours to complete each letter, and their words are an important part of your application.

Thank them for putting the time and effort into your letter of reference. Give them a hand-written card or letter telling them how much you appreciate their assistance.