How to Ask a Professor for a Reference: Tips for Requesting Recommendations for Employment from College Professors

by Alison Doyle

(Ed’s Note: While this information is specifically for soliciting recommendations from a professor, the same lessons can apply to an internship supervisor/relevant employer.)

College professors, particularly those who have taught you in multiple classes, can provide powerful recommendations for employers. After all, they have observed you analyze, write, articulate your views and present to groups.

Professors can also attest to the overall caliber and quality of your work. Many professors have an abundance of contacts in the professional world, including ex-students and consulting clients, and they usually have a high degree of credibility with these contacts.

**How to Ask for a Recommendation**

Even if you already have a positive relationship with your professor, it's important to be tactful when asking for a recommendation. You need to keep in mind that professors teach a great number of students.

Although they may have a very positive general impression of you, the most convincing references will require them to give a fair amount of detail to support their positive assertions. You can help them to accomplish this by supplying some of this detail when you make your request.

**Prepare a Summary Document**

Prepare a summary document that lists each course you took with the professor and references any papers or projects that you successfully completed. Include the grade for individual projects as well as the overall grade for the course. If you have saved a couple of papers that were well received - those with glowing comments in red - supply copies of those documents.

**Provide Your Resume**

Share your resume to give the professor a summary of your extracurricular achievements and your work experience. Describe in writing the types of jobs you're after, and the qualifications that you are focusing on.
Include a Summary of Accomplishments
Including a summary of accomplishments can help with this process. If possible, point to specific classes or projects where you may have showcased some of the core skills you would like the recommendation to emphasize.

Request a Meeting
Arrange a face-to-face meeting with the professor. On your first visit, ask if the faculty member would be comfortable endorsing you as a candidate for the types of jobs you're applying to, and then ask if you can stop in during office hours to discuss the matter further.

Make sure you state precisely what you are asking them to do, such as to write a general letter of recommendation, to write a recommendation for a specific job, or for permission to list them as a reference.

Give your faculty members as much advance notice as possible. Towards the end of the semester, they may be burdened by grading papers and exams as well as writing recommendations for many other students. A good rule of thumb is a three-week advance notice, if possible.

Update Your Job Search Progress
Keep your faculty members up to date with your job search as it progresses. Make sure to let them know if you an employer seems to be ready to conduct a reference check. You should also provide the professor with a job description and copy of your cover letter so they will be prepared should they receive a call.