LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION (LORs)

Q1: What purpose do LORs serve?

- provide interpersonal and relational information about you
- assess your fitness for a program or enterprise
- allow reviewers to get to know you beyond your resume
- give insight into who you are rather than what you are
- confirm strengths and balance out weaknesses evident in your application

Q2: What type of person should write a LOR?

- someone whom the readers will find credible and that meets the reference writer criteria
- professors and/or supervisors with whom you have worked in a professional setting
- someone who matches the goals and mission of the opportunity you seek
- someone who will speak to your strengths
- the best writer for you, which is limited to professors in whose course you got an A

Q3: Who should not write a LOR for me?

- friends, parents, relatives, peers or TAs unless specifically required
- anyone from high school unless specifically required
- anyone with a high rank or title that does not actually know you and your work

Q4: Can a weak LOR damage my application?

- Weak or damaging LORs reflect on you, not the writer, and lessen chances of selection.

Q5: When do I ask someone to write a LOR for me?

- Your request for a LOR begins before you need one. Cultivating relationships with professors during and after a course is key because every professor you have is a potential recommendation writer.
- with enough lead time for the writer (weeks ahead, not days)

Q6: How do I ask for a LOR?

- “Would you feel comfortable writing me a strong, positive letter of recommendation?”
- in person (by phone if not possible; avoid email)
- with attention given to the response, e.g. hesitation when asked
- with the understanding that nobody is required to write a LOR for you
Q7: What do I give the letter writer after s/he agrees to write a LOR?

- a reminder of how long you have known each other and in what capacity
- information about the opportunity and specific application criteria for the LOR
- a request to use official letterhead, sign the letter, and provide contact information
- a copy of your application materials (essays, resume, etc.)
- work samples from the writer’s class (projects, etc.)
- a short summary of what you learned as a person and as a student in his/her class
- your full legal name and a reminder if you use a nickname
- an unofficial transcript when appropriate/possible
- permission to mention (or a request not to) circumstances that affected your performance
- deadlines (provide a false deadline if necessary)

Q8: What should I do after someone agrees to write a LOR for me?

- Follow up and check in as the deadline approaches.
- Have back-up writers in place in case the writers do not follow through for you.
- Provide updates about the status of your completed application.
- Let the writer know the results of your application.
- Write a handwritten thank you note.
- Maintain the relationship.