



The proper form to use when asking one of your teachers—or, indeed, any person who might be a reference for you—for a letter is not, “Would you write me a letter of reference?” Nearly always, the person will write you a letter. That is part of our job. We consider it our duty. What we cannot always tell you is what kind of a letter we will write. Very seldom will any professor write an actively negative letter, or letter of warning, but there are a thousand tiny signals that reference letter writers (and readers) know that are nearly as damaging to a candidate’s chances. Lukewarm letters filled with tentativeness and “inability to judge” are perhaps even more damaging than outright condemnations. Here is how to avoid them.

- ◆ The best question to ask is this: “Do you feel you know my work well enough to write me a good letter of recommendation?” This way of putting the question lets both you and the professor off the hook. If the professor does not clearly recollect or does not particularly like the work s/he has seen from you, it’s always possible to say that s/he simply doesn’t know your work well enough. That relieves you of embarrassment and of a lukewarm letter. By asking the question this way, you’ll be certain that only professors who are enthusiastic about your work will write letters for you.
- ◆ Always consider signing the waiver of right to read your letters. By asking the question as stated above, you can be certain that you won’t have to worry about a bad letter. Some students do not waive their rights to read letters, and the letters written for them, no matter how glowing, are often heavily discounted by readers. The general assumption is that no professor will write a bad or even a very lukewarm letter if the student is likely to read it. Letters without waiver simply do not carry as much weight.
- ◆ Always provide the necessary forms, completely filled out, along with a stamped and addressed envelope that the professor can simply send. Although some professors are generous about these protocols, remember that the writers of your letters are doing you a favor, often at considerable expense of time and energy. Make their job as easy and as little filled with clerical work as possible.
- ◆ Include with the forms and envelopes any information about yourself and your work that may be useful to the professor when s/he is writing. Don’t assume that professors will always remember each detail of your work in a class two years ago. Dig out the papers from the course and provide copies, and include a current vita or resume that covers all of your activities and interests. If you give your writers material with which to work, the resulting letters will be more detailed and far more effective.
- ◆ Finally, after the whole application process is over, take the time to contact your references, let them know how it came out, and thank them. Not only is taking such trouble simple generosity of spirit, but it will let your writers know whether their rhetoric was successful, whether the letters accomplished their task. You will make your writers feel good and will be helping them to write better letters for other students.