

How To Ask For — And Get — The Best Letters of Recommendation

One of the best ways to avoid application headaches is to be well-organized and nowhere is this more true than in dealing with recommendations. First and most important: ask well in advance of the deadline! Three weeks is minimum. Six weeks lead-time is best.

❖ Who do you pick?

Understand what kind of referee is needed. Faculty? Personal? Read the questions and instructions to see who you know that can respond fully to as many questions as possible. See the study abroad website for question details:

<http://willamette.edu/offices/oie/abroad/apply/faq-page/index.html>

For faculty: Always ask an instructor who knows more about you than the grade you earned in class. Is there a particular class where you contributed often? Had a memorable presentation? What about your freshman colloquium professor, do you have a positive relationship with him/her? If you don't feel like you know any professors very well – start a dialog! Go to their office hours, ask them about their international experiences, and tell them why you want to study abroad. (See “Help Them Help You”)

For personal: It can be a faculty member but he/she should know you outside of the classroom setting. Read the instructions carefully. A friend or other WU student do not qualify as referees. This needs to be someone who can be objective about your strengths and weaknesses- supervisor, coach, clergy person, club advisor, etc.

❖ Asking (Sooner Rather Than Later)

Never assume that someone WILL do this just because you need them to do so. By asking early, he/she will be more receptive to the request and less likely to refuse because they are already overloaded.

Have a conversation and ask him/her bluntly: “Do you feel you know me (or my academic record, my leadership qualities) well enough to give me a strong recommendation for my application to study abroad?” and “Do you have time to complete a recommendation for me?”

Most of your professors and other potential referees will say “yes” enthusiastically, but framing the request this way gives potential referees the opportunity to decline gracefully. A referee who is reluctant or pressed for time will generally write a lukewarm letter--a waste of their time and a potential red flag on your application!

❖ Help Them Help You

If you don't feel that you know the recommender well or they don't know you well enough, provide him/her with information about you!

Schedule an appointment to discuss the following.

1. *WHY do you want to study abroad?*
2. *WHICH study abroad programs are you considering and WHY? Why do certain programs or study abroad in general work for your academic goals? It is not necessary to know exactly to which program(s) you will apply before asking for recommendations.*
3. *The official recommendation form-* You will send the recommendation form to your recommender electronically. Be sure to communicate with your recommender before you send them the electronic request. The form will ask that you waive your right to access the completed recommendation. This is typical under the Family Rights and Privacy Act of 1974. If you don't waive this access, selection committees often won't take the letter seriously and some faculty aren't comfortable writing a letter unless you have waived this right.
4. Be clear that the recommendation needs to be completed using the online process. They cannot simply write a letter instead of using the online form. They will receive instructions via email about how to complete the form.
5. If *your grades are lower* than they should be, identify any extenuating circumstances, such as family responsibilities, working 30 hours a week to put yourself through school, etc.
6. If you are applying to a *particularly competitive program* tell your referee why that program is best for you based on the program attributes.

❖ **THANK THEM!** Finally, be sure to write your references a note of thanks, and let them know what happens!