Asking for a Letter of Reference

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Educators are often asked to supply letters of reference for students seeking employment or further education. These letters are an important part of your employment and educational aspirations and should be treated seriously. This PowerPoint resource provides some of my expectations and guidelines for such letters. Suggestions for improvements and new websites of interest (see slide 6) are welcome.

Contact me at burtch@sfu.ca or 778 782-4038

I am grateful to Judith Jensen Waring (SFU Learning & Instructional Development Centre) for input on this project.
General Guidelines

- Allow at least two weeks for me to write the letter, especially during peak teaching or grading times.
- Don’t overload: e.g., applying to 18 law schools and 24 graduate schools!
  - So, be selective and reasonable in your request; e.g., no more than 10 letters of reference.
- Supply all necessary documents, including stamped, addressed envelopes (SASEs) & application forms.
- Verify that the letters are completed and posted.
- Be true to yourself – don’t downplay or inflate your accomplishments.
I occasionally decline a letter of reference request. Why?

• Unfamiliar with student’s work
• Unable to write a positive letter; therefore, seek another referee
• Student is unable to supply complete documentation in a timely way
Websites of Interest

N.B. Use an Internet search engine (e.g. Google, Metacrawler) to search for new sites

- [http://climate.envsci.rutgers.edu/AskingForReferenceLetter.htm](http://climate.envsci.rutgers.edu/AskingForReferenceLetter.htm) (How to ask a Professor for a reference letter)
“Eye of the Tiger”: Don’t sell yourself short....

- Speak to your strengths
- Distinguish between actual accomplishments and qualifications vs. future plans and your potential
- Consider letters from different sectors, e.g. a teacher, employer, politician
- Double-check your spelling, grammar, accuracy of information
Checklist: Required Documents

- Unofficial SFU academic transcript, most recent version
- Resumé or c.v.
- Statement of interest (why you want to enter a program or take a particular job)
- Application forms, filled in with your name and other generic information
  - I will fill in the assessment but you should fill in your name, student #, address, name of program you are applying for etc. Also fill in my name and contact information.
- Self-addressed, stamped envelopes for each letter
Checklist (continued)

Indicate which course(s) you took with me:

- [ ] course name & number
- [ ] semester & year
- [ ] grade received
- [ ] contributions and accomplishments inside the course: e.g. the title of a major essay or thesis, comments I made, key discussions
### Successful & Unsuccessful Requests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Timeline</td>
<td>2 weeks’ notice</td>
<td>Less than 2 weeks’ notice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SASE</td>
<td>Self-addressed, stamped envelope, including return address</td>
<td>No envelopes, no postage, no addresses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents</td>
<td>Complete</td>
<td>Partial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>Meeting with me, verification of file, ensuring letters are posted</td>
<td>No contact with me or institution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Accuracy of Letter of Reference

- Contact me by email [burtch@sfu.ca] or phone 778 782-4038
- Leave a telephone number where I can reach you
- We can set a convenient time to meet to discuss the letter
- Could any information be added to - or deleted from - my draft letter of reference?
- Keep a locatable file for all your applications
- Double-check requirements for applications
- Verify with the institution you are applying to (e.g. Law School, Graduate School) that your file is complete
Final thoughts... Persistence

Even the best-crafted letters of reference cannot guarantee acceptance into a specific programme. It is crucial that you are prepared for rejection and for acceptance, and that you are resilient enough to reapply, if necessary. Feel free to contact me with news of the outcome of your applications or to seek specific guidance.

“Pippin”, photo by B. Burtch

“Cats, no less liquid than their shadows, offer no angles to the wind.” A.S.J. Tessimond
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