

## Guidelines for Students Requesting a Letter of Recommendation

Severine Autesserre – Barnard College, Columbia University

Writing reference letters is a nice way to me to reconnect with former students and help them achieve their career goals, but it is a time-consuming process and it can also become a nightmare. So, here is a set of general guidelines that I ask you to follow if you would like me to write a recommendation letter for you.

I am usually happy to write letters of recommendation for students who have done well in my class (meaning, who have received an A+, an A, or an A-). If you received a lower grade, I strongly suggest that you contact another professor in whose class you performed better. Please respect my decision if I say no: I will only write for students whose academic potential I can endorse strongly, and believe me, you don't want a lukewarm letter, it would spoil all your chances of getting what you are applying for.

Please group all of your requests for recommendation letters together, so that I can write them all at once. Please ask me at least **two months before the first letter is due** and please also give me a due date for the first recommendation letter.

Please give me a copy of the following items, as separate documents attached to a single e-mail, at least two months before your first letter is due. Feel free to ask me if you have questions or are unsure about any part of it.

1. Your **CV** (or resume). Please highlight information on research or professional experiences, extracurricular activities, or anything else that you think would be relevant for me to mention in your letter.
2. Approximately **5 bullet points** (phrased in the 3rd person, in English—as if I could cut and paste them into a letter, although I'll likely amend them) that speak to your experience with me, your broader experience, and suitability for the fellowship or program or job to which you're applying. Don't be modest! Also, please don't copy them verbatim from your materials in case I use any point as is.  
If you wish, please feel free to add other bullet points on anything that you know I know about you, and that you'd like me to make sure I mention in my letter. Also feel free to include any points that you think would be important for me to mention in my letter.  
For instance: Which strengths / past activities / accomplishments would you like me to highlight? Is there anything specific on which you would like me to comment (for example: level of English proficiency for international students, a particular personal quality, the leadership you demonstrated on a group project you did with me, etc)? It will help if you bluntly point out your strengths (again, don't be modest!), and the more you can tell the more likely I'll be able to write a good recommendation letter.
3. A copy of your **transcripts** (unofficial is fine), with the courses you took with me highlighted. Be sure to write the semester and year of the class if that's not apparent from the transcript.
4. Your **personal statement and/or proposal statement**, if applicable. (A draft is perfectly OK.)
5. Your GRE, MCAT, TOEFL, or other required professional **test scores**, if applicable.
6. If you took a large lecture class with me, please **ask your TA** to write one or two paragraphs on your performance during the discussion section, and to email it to me at least a month before your first letter is due. It will enable me to write a better, more personalized and thus more convincing letter.
7. **A list of all the schools / employers** to which you want a letter sent, including application deadlines. Please organize the list chronologically, by the date on which the letter is due.

Please be sure to list the precise degree or job you are seeking, and give the exact name of the department (e.g., seeking a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Department of Political Science at NYU; seeking a Master in International Affairs from the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, etc.).

For each of the schools / employers, please give me all the details about where the letter needs to go. If I have to submit the letter electronically, give me the email address or URL —double-check that these are correct – and tell me if there is a particular person to whom the email should be addressed. If the school will send me a link to submit my letter, please let me know and tell me when to expect it (again, please make sure that I receive it at least a month before the letter is due).

If you plan to use your university's dossier service (meaning I need to write only one generic letter, which will be saved in a special database and can be sent to several universities or companies upon request), please tell me exactly how to submit the letter to your university's dossier service.

Please also **complete all of the information** on the forms the school / employer / dossier service asks you to fill out. Meaning, please fill out not only your name and personal info, but also my name, rank, address, etc., as follow:

Full Name : Séverine Autesserre  
Rank : Professor  
Address : Department of Political Science  
Barnard College, Columbia University  
3009 Broadway  
New York, NY 10027  
Phone : 212-854-4877  
Fax : 212-854-3024  
Website : [www.severineautesserre.com](http://www.severineautesserre.com)  
Email : sa435@columbia.edu

Please **waive your right** to inspect your files and your letters. If you don't waive this right, graduate schools and potential employers are likely to wonder whether you have something to hide. Feel free to contact me if you don't feel comfortable doing that, but as a general rule if you can't trust what I have to say about you, then I am probably not the right person to write the letter for you.

Please feel free to send me an email a couple of days before the recommendation is due, just to be on the safe side, to make sure that I have sent out or submitted your letter(s).

Finally, please **let me know how it turns out!** I truly mean it: Please don't forget to tell me when you get the results, whether they are positive or negative. I wish you the best, and I'm always thrilled when I receive good news from former students.

Good luck with your applications!