

**Looking for a Few Good  
Letters of Recommendation?  
A Few Pointers on How NOT To Proceed**

by Peter Wallenstein

**I. Process.** Take care of business.

1. Read directions. Sometimes, letters are to be returned (in sealed envelopes) to the applicant. Others go straight to the school. Having to figure out which are which is not entertaining to your professor.
2. More generally, make sure your professor knows where the letter is to go. Guessing is not fun. (Check with them, too, about how they wish for you to supply addresses—and whether they wish you to supply envelopes.) The “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy has no place here.
3. Make your deadline clear. From your busy professor’s point of view, if next week is as good as this week, it is probably much better than this week. (That will be true next week, too.) But don’t be asking that it be done this week—leave ample time between your request and the deadline! (Let the professor be the one to decide if this is the week.)
4. Be sure to sign the waiver section at the top of the form. (Sign it yes, or sign it no, but sign it.) Supplying letter-forms to people without first doing so is not helpful—to you or your professor.
5. The person you ask to write for you might wish to see your vita and a statement of purpose. (Have them ready, and offer them to your recommenders.)

**II. Decisions.** Who to ask? Make judicious choices.

1. Pick the right person. You are a senior, and you ask someone who taught you in a large class, a lower-division course, long ago, a class in which you did indifferent work—not a strong choice.
2. Ask the right question. Question (alt. 1): “Could you write a letter for me?” Answer: Certainly. Question (alt. 2): “Could you write an enthusiastically favorable letter for me?” Answer . . . (Hmm. What superlatives spring to mind to describe this person?)

**III. Substance.** How to plan ahead? Plan ahead. (This should come first, of course, not last.)

1. Give some thought—before the time comes—to recruiting people who will be able to recommend you with enthusiasm. Get acquainted with them. Do not be a stranger when it comes time to ask them to help you secure the future you have selected.
2. Above all, do excellent work in their classes. Can you work hard, work effectively, think clearly, write fine prose, contribute to a class discussion? Do you have something to say, and do you say it well? (Are you a critical thinker, an elegant writer, a good citizen? Yes?)
3. To historians (and other academics, too)—whether doing research or writing letters of recommendation—evidence is crucial. When you ask, and they agree, be sure they have what they need to write about you.