

WHAT TO DO IF YOU WOULD LIKE ELLEN PEEL TO WRITE

A RECOMMENDATION FOR YOU

Every year I receive requests from numerous students that I write letters of recommendation, sometimes numerous letters. I enjoy helping my students move on to new achievements. Writing recommendations, at least in my detailed way, is a lot of work, and so I've drawn up these guidelines to save myself work and to ensure that the letter I write will be as accurate and persuasive as possible--in other words, to ensure that the work will pay off. Probably you've already thought of some of what I suggest below; the guidelines are intended to make sure that nothing gets forgotten.

Before You Contact Me

1. Think carefully about whether you really want the kind of graduate or professional training you are applying for and whether you really want the career for which it prepares you. Talk not only to people currently in such programs but also to people actually in the careers: English professors, lawyers, or whoever they may be. You might want to get an M.A. simply for personal enrichment, but a doctorate or a degree in law or medicine requires grueling work that few people consider worth the effort unless they then go on to practice and enjoy what the program trained them for.
2. Think carefully about which schools to apply to. It would be ideal to talk to faculty, students, and graduates of each. Do not waste everybody's time and your money by applying to too many, but I would suggest applying to one or two long-shots and one or two back-ups, along with a few medium-range schools.
3. In all your communications with the programs, be sure to follow directions exactly and to use perfect grammar and spelling. Do not treat this as you may have treated assignments for past classes: that's not good enough. Have a compulsive friend proofread everything.
4. Most applications, even online ones, give you the choice of either seeing the recommendations written for you or waiving the right to see them, so you'll need to think about which you would prefer. Conventional wisdom holds that waiving the right will cause the school to take the recommendation more seriously, but the choice is up to you. Note that some applications ask you to sign only if you're waiving the right, whereas others offer one place to sign if you're waiving the right and another place to sign if you're not.

When You Contact Me

1. Ask me informally if I will write the letters--I usually can but may not have time or may not have time to do as many as you'd like.
2. When you give me your materials, include your phone number and email address in case I have any questions.
3. To help me prepare my recommendations, please provide the materials described below. Try to give me everything at the same time and in final form. If you absolutely must add or change something, make it extremely clear and redo the entire table described in #8 below. Most schools will have me submit my recommendation electronically, but a few will ask for hard copies; I address both situations below.

For each class you took from me, provide:

- a. The department, number, title, semester, and year of the course.
 - b. Your grade in the course.
 - c. Information on your final paper or project, including a one- or two-sentence summary of its main point and a photocopy of the sheet on which I made my summary comments.
You might want to include a photocopy of the first and last page or two of the paper, if you think that will make the argument clearer.
 - d. (Optional) Similar information on other work you did in the course.
4. For me, write a one- or two-paragraph statement about why you want to pursue graduate or professional training, what you plan to do afterward, and whether there are any special points you might like me to mention in my letter.
 5. For each form I am to fill out, first fill out your part, then fill in the information concerning me, using abbreviations if necessary. (A hard-copy form will look more professional if you do not use handwriting but instead type or fill it in by computer.) The headings will usually look more or less like those I've underlined below:
 - a. Name: Ellen Peel
 - b. Title or Position: Professor
 - c. Department: Department of Comparative and World Literature;
Department of English. Reverse order of departments if appropriate.
 - d. Institution: San Francisco State University
 - e. Address: 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132
 - f. Signature and Date: Leave blank

6. Although I do put the x's in boxes that ask, say, if you are in the top ten percent of students, I do not fill in each section of each form that asks for prose about your intellectual capacity, emotional maturity, and so on. Instead I usually write a general letter and then send it electronically or print it on letterhead, sending a photocopy to each school. Therefore you need to:

- a. In each blank intended for prose, say:
See letter.
- b. To enable me to write a single letter that will answer all the questions asked by all the schools, go through all the forms and make a single list of all the traits they want me to comment on, such as intellectual capacity and emotional maturity. I will consult your list rather than the forms in writing the letter.

7. Many schools ask for the recommendation to be sent electronically; in that case, disregard the rest of step #7.

If, however, schools want a hard copy, follow step #7. They will tell you if they expect me to mail the recommendation to them or to mail it to you, to be forwarded to them. Please supply me with envelopes as explained below:

- a. If a school wants me to mail the letter directly, I need a stamped envelope addressed to the school, bearing my return address.
- b. If a school wants me to put the letter in a sealed envelope and return it to you, so that you can send it unopened along with your other application materials for that school, there are in general two possibilities:
 - i. I need a stamped envelope addressed to you, bearing my return address and also saying on it somewhere what school it is intended for.
 - ii. Or I need an unstamped envelope that says something like: "Recommendation written by Ellen Peel concerning Jane Doe's application to English Department at UC-Berkeley." In this case, I will also need a manila envelope addressed to you, bearing my return address and enough postage (weigh it). I'll send all unstamped envelopes together to you in the manila one.

If a school gives more specific instructions, follow those.

8. Give me a table listing your applications, ranging from the one due earliest to the one due latest. Include the following columns (see sample below):

- a. On what date my recommendation is due. If I'm to mail the recommendation to you for you to send on, tell me the date by which you need it.
- b. What the school, program, and degree are
- c. Whether I do it electronically, or mail the letter directly to the school or

- to you
- d. Whether I just write the letter or also fill out a form

Sample table

<u>Date due</u>	<u>School, program, & degree</u>	<u>Send electronically, or mail to school or to student</u>	<u>Letter, or letter & form</u>
Jan. 1	Big Univ., Law School, J.D.	School	Letter
Jan. 15	Small Univ., Comp. Lit., M.A.	Student	Letter and form
Feb. 1	Medium Univ., English, Ph.D.	Electronically	Letter

9. As a courtesy and as an aid to me in advising future students, let me know the results of your applications.

Please follow these guidelines, so that I won't have to return your materials.

Best wishes for your future!

Updated 9/5/2013