UPREP
HOW TO ASK FOR A RECOMMENDATION LETTER

Free resource

Who to ask, when to ask, what to say, and what to hand over, with ready-to-use scripts for letters, verifying references, and school nominations across Ontario programs.

12 pages | Ready-to-use scripts | Letters, references, nominations | Tracker included



PREPARE FOR WHAT'S NEXT

For any questions or concerns contact us at hello@uprepcanada.ca

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WHAT IS A RECOMMENDATION LETTER?

A recommendation letter, also called a reference letter, is a letter written by someone who knows you well, such as a teacher, counsellor, coach, or supervisor. It describes your character, strengths, and work. Your grades and activity list show what you did. A good letter shows what you are like to learn, work, and lead alongside.

A letter is only as strong as the details behind it. A teacher with 30 requests and no background on you will write something general. A teacher who has your brag sheet, your goals, and a clear deadline can write something specific. Most of the work in getting a strong letter is in how you ask and what you hand over, and that is what this guide covers.

Many Ontario undergraduate programs do not require letters at all, but some programs, scholarships, awards, and summer opportunities do. This guide helps you work out whether you need one, who to ask, when to ask, how to ask, and what to give them.

4 to 6 weeks
ask before the deadline

1
email with everything your writer needs

5
things every request should include

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Find out first whether you need a letter. Many Ontario programs do not require one, but some programs and scholarships do.
- Ask at least 4 to 6 weeks before the deadline, and give your writer your brag sheet and the submission instructions.
- Send a friendly reminder, confirm the letter was submitted, and say thank you.

IMPORTANT

Requirements differ by program, scholarship, and opportunity. Always follow the exact instructions you are given about who can write the letter, how it is submitted, and when it is due.

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SECTION 1

1 DO YOU ACTUALLY NEED ONE?

Before you ask anyone, find out whether you need a letter at all. Asking a teacher for something you do not need wastes their time and yours.

- **Many Ontario university programs do not require one.** For example, the University of Toronto states that most of its program areas do not require essays, reference letters, or personal statements.
- **Some programs and supplementary applications do.** They may ask for a letter, or for named contacts who can verify your activities. Western's Ivey AEO, for example, requires a reference who can verify your involvement in each activity you list, and says applications without verified references will not be considered. Schulich's Leadership Profile and the U of T Engineering Student Profile also ask for people who can confirm your activities.
- **Some programs ask you not to send extra materials.** Queen's, for example, asks applicants not to send reference letters or CVs for Health Sciences. If a program does not ask for a letter, do not send one.
- **Many scholarships and awards ask for one or two letters.** This is especially common for external scholarships and leadership or community awards.
- **Summer programs, co-ops, and jobs often ask for references.** Start building those relationships early.
- **You may need letters later.** Teachers and mentors who know you well now will be easier to ask in a year or two.

How to find out: Check the instructions on each program, scholarship, or opportunity page. If it is unclear, email the admission or awards office.

Copy this tracker and fill in a row for each opportunity that asks for a letter, or use the UPrep Recommendation and Reference Tracker Google Sheet, which calculates your reminder dates for you:

Opportunity	Letter required?	How many?	Who can write it?	How is it submitted?	Deadline

TIP "How is it submitted?" matters. Some letters are uploaded by you, some are emailed to the writer as a private link, and some must be sent directly by the writer. Your request has to match.

SECTION 2

2 LETTERS, REFERENCES, AND NOMINATIONS: WHICH ONE IS YOURS?

Ontario applications use three different things that all get called "a reference." They need different requests, so work out which one you are dealing with before you ask.

Type	What your writer does	Where it shows up
Verifying reference	Confirms your role, dates, and involvement in an activity, usually through a short form or email. Does not write a full letter.	Western Ivey AEO (a reference for each activity listed). Schulich BBA Leadership Profile (a referee for each of 3 to 5 experiences; missing or incomplete references mean that experience is not evaluated). U of T Engineering Student Profile (each extracurricular needs a reference or proof from a teacher, employer, or supervisor, not family).
Referee form or letter	Answers set questions or writes a short letter about you through a link or form.	U of T Kinesiology Statement of Interest (one referee). Waterloo Optometry (two references) and Doctor of Pharmacy (one). King's Catholic Studies for Teachers (references with essays and an experience profile). Many external scholarships such as the Loran Award, which asks a referee who is not a family member or friend (a teacher, coach, employer, or community leader) to complete a form.
School nomination	Your high school (usually the counsellor or principal) chooses and submits you. Teachers may contribute.	Schulich Leader Scholarships (each high school nominates one student; the school submits the nominee by January 27, 2027, then the student applies by February 17, 2027). Queen's Chancellor's Scholarship (high school nomination required). U of T National Scholarship and Western National Scholarship (school nomination, then your own application).

What this means for your request:

- For a **verifying reference**, your request should be short and easy: your role, the dates, and the form or link. Give the person the exact wording the program asks them to confirm.
- For a **referee form or letter**, use the full approach in Sections 5 to 7.
- For a **school nomination**, talk to your counsellor early. Nominations often close months before the scholarship application. For 2027 entry, U of T's National Scholarship school nomination deadline was October 9, 2026, with student applications due October 30, 2026. Ask your counsellor in September, or right away if a nomination deadline is still open.

WARNING

A verifying reference can disqualify an experience if the person does not respond. Choose people who check their email, tell them to expect a message from the program, and follow up before the deadline.

SCRIPT (VERIFYING REFERENCE)

"Hi [Name], I'm applying to [program], and it asks for someone who can confirm my involvement in [activity] from [start date] to [end date], where I [your role]. It will send you a short [form or email] from [sender] by [date]. Could you confirm that for me? I can send you a summary of what I did so you have the details in front of you. If you'd rather not, no problem, just let me know by [date]."

SECTION 3

3 WHO TO ASK (AND WHO NOT TO)

Look for someone who

- Knows your work well and can describe specific moments
- Has seen you improve, take initiative, or help others
- Is likely to say yes with enthusiasm
- Is reliable about deadlines

Who not to ask

- Someone who barely knows you, just because of their title
- A family member or close friend, unless the instructions specifically allow it
- Someone who has told you they are too busy, or who cannot meet your deadline
- Anyone the instructions do not allow. Some opportunities specify who can write the letter, so read the rules first.

Match the writer to the purpose:

If the letter is for...	Consider asking...
An academic program or scholarship	A Grade 11 or 12 teacher from a related subject, or from a class where you grew the most
A leadership or community award	A club advisor, coach, or volunteer coordinator who has seen you in action
A co-op, job, or summer program	A current or past supervisor
A scholarship that asks about your character or story	A counsellor or mentor who knows you well
An engineering, computing, or science program	A math, science, or computer science teacher, or a robotics, coding, or research mentor who saw you work through a hard problem
A health, nursing, or kinesiology program	A teacher from biology or health, or a volunteer coordinator at a hospital, clinic, or care home who saw you with people
An arts, music, theatre, or design program	An arts or music teacher, director, or private instructor who watched your work grow
A humanities, social science, or education program	An English, history, or social science teacher, or a youth leader, tutor, or camp supervisor

TIP A specific letter from a teacher who knows you well will usually do more for you than a general letter from someone with an impressive title who does not.

SECTION 4
4 WHEN TO ASK

Ask at least 4 to 6 weeks before the deadline. Earlier is better. Teachers and counsellors often receive many requests at the same time in the fall, and a good letter takes time to write.

For opportunities with a January or February deadline, aim to ask in October or early November. If you are reading this later, ask now. A polite request with a clear deadline is almost always better than not asking.

6 weeks before	5 weeks before	2 weeks before	1 week before	After it is submitted
Decide who to ask, and ask them	Send your brag sheet and the submission instructions	Send a short, friendly reminder	Confirm that the letter has been submitted	Send a thank-you note

Before you ask:

- [ ] Write down every letter deadline in your calendar, with the dates from the table above
- [ ] Ask in person first if you can, then follow up by email with the details
- [ ] Give your writer everything on the same day, or within a few days of asking

TIP If you are not sure when something is due, ask early anyway. A writer who has plenty of time is a happier writer, and the letter is usually better for it.

SECTION 5
5 HOW TO ASK

The basics: Ask politely, tell them exactly what the letter is for and when it is due, and give them an easy way to say no. A writer who agrees freely writes a better letter than one who feels pressured.

SCRIPT (IN PERSON, SHORT VERSION)

"Hi [Teacher's name], do you have a minute? I'm applying to [program or scholarship], and I'm looking for someone who can write a letter of recommendation. I really enjoyed [course or activity], especially [specific project or moment], and I think you know my work well. Would you feel comfortable writing a strong letter for me? The deadline is [date], and I can send you everything you need to make it easy."

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SCRIPT (BY EMAIL)

Subject: Letter of recommendation request: [Your Name], [Program or Scholarship]

Hi [Name],

I hope you're doing well. I'm applying to [program or scholarship], and I'm asking a few people who have seen my work up close. I really enjoyed [course or activity], especially [specific project or moment], and I would be grateful if you would consider writing a letter of recommendation for me.

The deadline is [date], and the letter needs to be [uploaded through a link / sent by you directly / submitted another way]. To make it easier, I'm happy to send my brag sheet, which covers my activities, achievements, and goals, along with the submission instructions.

If you are not able to, or don't feel you're the right person, I completely understand. Could you let me know by [date] so I can plan?

Thank you for considering it.

[Your full name] [Grade, school] [Your email]

For a coach, advisor, or supervisor: Use the same message and swap in your activity or job: "I really valued working with you as [role] at [team, club, or workplace], especially when [specific moment]."

TIP Notice what these messages include: what the letter is for, why you are asking this person, the deadline, how it is submitted, and an easy way to say no. Keep all five.

SECTION 6

6 WHAT TO GIVE THEM

Give your writer a short package so they do not have to guess. Send it all in one email.

- [ ] Your completed brag sheet (the UPrep Brag Sheet Template). It gives them the full picture, including projects, leadership, and moments they may not have seen.
- [ ] What you are applying for and why, in two or three sentences about your goals
- [ ] The deadline and exact submission instructions: where it goes, who submits it, and any link or code
- [ ] Any form, questions, or word limits the writer needs to follow
- [ ] Your resume or activity list, if you have one
- [ ] Two or three specific moments from their class or activity that you would like them to remember
- [ ] Your contact details, in case they have a question

Remind them of the right kind of moments. What a writer can speak to depends on how they know you. Here are examples of the details that help each kind of writer:

If your writer is a...	Remind them of...
Math, science, or computer science teacher	A hard problem you worked through, a lab or project where you took the lead, how you improved over the term
Arts, music, or drama teacher or director	Your process as well as the finished piece: drafts, practice habits, a performance or critique that changed how you work
Coach or team leader	A tough game, season, or injury, how you supported teammates, and the roles you took on
Volunteer coordinator (hospital, clinic, care home, food bank)	Your regular shifts, how you handled difficult moments, how people responded to you
English, history, or social science teacher	An essay, debate, or discussion where your thinking stood out, and how you responded to feedback
Employer or supervisor	Your responsibilities, a time you took initiative, and results you can count

Remind them of specific moments. Specific reminders help writers write specific letters. A simple format is: "In [course or activity], I [what you did], and [what changed because of it]." Add numbers where you can.

Share facts, not finished wording. Your writer should use their own words and their own view of you. If someone asks for talking points, give them a short list of facts and examples, not a drafted letter.

TIP Numbers and specifics give your writer something concrete to say. "Tutored [number] classmates [how often] for [how long]" is easier to write about than "helped others."

SECTION 7

7 FOLLOWING UP AND SAYING THANK YOU

Send a friendly reminder about 2 weeks before the deadline. Keep it short and kind.

SCRIPT (REMINDER EMAIL)

Subject: Quick reminder: recommendation letter due [date]

Hi [Name],

I hope your week is going well. I wanted to send a quick reminder that the letter for [program or scholarship] is due on [date]. Please let me know if you need anything else from me, including more details about my activities or a different format. Thank you again for supporting me.

[Your name]

Confirm it was submitted. About a week before the deadline, check that the letter has been sent. If the system shows you the status, look there. If not, ask politely.

Say thank you. Within a week of the letter being submitted, send a short note. Be specific about what their help meant to you.

SCRIPT (THANK-YOU NOTE)

Hi [Name],

Thank you so much for writing my letter for [program or scholarship]. I know it took time, and I really appreciate that you supported me. I'll let you know how things turn out.

[Your name]

Close the loop. After you hear back, tell them. A short update means a lot to people who invested time in you, and it makes them more likely to help again.

SECTION 8

8 IF IT DOES NOT GO SMOOTHLY

- **They say no.** Thank them and ask someone else. A polite no is better than a rushed letter.
- **They say yes but nothing has happened.** Send your reminder at 2 weeks out, then a shorter nudge about a week out. If it is still not done and the rules allow it, ask your guidance counsellor for advice or ask a backup writer.
- **They ask you for a draft.** Give them bullet points of facts, examples, and numbers instead of a finished letter. The letter should be in their voice and reflect their own view of you.
- **You are not sure what they wrote.** Do not ask to read it unless they offer. Letters are often confidential, and trusting your writer is part of the process.
- **The deadline is very close.** Ask if there is anything you can do to make it easier, and be gracious about whatever they can offer.
- **The opportunity needs a specific kind of writer and you do not have one.** Contact the awards or admission office, explain your situation, and ask what they accept.

TIPS, TRICKS & NOTES

Be specific, always
Specifics in your request and in your brag sheet lead to specifics in the letter.

Ask early and ask kindly
Four to six weeks is the minimum, and a polite request is easy to say yes to.

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Ask only the people you need
A short, targeted list is better than asking everyone you know.

Make it easy
Put everything in one email: the brag sheet, the deadline, and the submission steps.

Keep your brag sheet updated
If you refresh it each term, any future request takes minutes instead of days.

Respect a "no" or a "not right now."
Thank them and move on to someone else.

Say thank you every time
A short, specific note goes a long way.

Keep a list of who has written for you, and for what
That way you never ask someone for a second letter without telling them what it is for.

Plan for next time
Letters come up again for scholarships, co-ops, and programs later on, so treat each relationship as one worth keeping.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

UPrep provides guidance, strategy, and feedback to help students present the strongest possible application. UPrep does not write applications, essays, or letters on behalf of students. A recommendation letter must be written by the person recommending you. Admission decisions are made solely by universities based on many factors outside anyone's control, and no specific outcome can be guaranteed. Requirements differ by program and scholarship, so confirm the instructions for each one before you act on them.

Sources (checked October 11, 2026):

- University of Toronto: Requirements for Canadian students (future.utoronto.ca/requirements-canadian-students)
- Western Ivey: AEO Supplemental Application (ivey.uwo.ca/hba/admissions/aeo-supplemental-application)
- Schulich: Supplementary Application Details (schulich.yorku.ca/admissions/suppapp)
- University of Toronto: Engineering Student Profile and Supplemental Applications (discover.engineering.utoronto.ca, future.utoronto.ca/supplemental-applications)
- Queen's: Supplementary Application FAQ (queensu.ca/admission/applying/supplementary-application-faq)
- Loran Scholars Foundation: How to apply (loranscholar.ca)
- Schulich Leader Scholarships (schulichleaders.com)
- OUAC: Guidance Dialogues Resource Guide, Fall 2026 (guidance.ouac.on.ca/docs/resource_guide.pdf)
- Queen's: Major Admission Awards (queensu.ca/registrar)

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UPrep provides guidance, strategy and feedback to help students present the strongest possible application. Admission decisions are made solely by universities, and no specific outcome can be guaranteed.