

HOW TO GET BETTER
**RECOMMENDATION
LETTERS**

FOR YOUR NEXT EDUCATIONAL
LEADERSHIP JOB APPLICATION

ASCEND

SEARCH. APPLY. INTERVIEW. WIN.



THE PRINCIPAL CENTER

ASK WHAT YOU CAN DO TO EARN THEIR BEST RECOMMENDATION

Start before you're even ready to ask for a recommendation letter. The letter itself shouldn't be your first request.

Instead, ask for advice on becoming the best candidate you can be.

Say something like, "I'll be applying for new positions soon, and I wanted to see if you had any advice for me on what I should do to make sure I'm 100% ready. Is there anything that you'd like to see before you'd feel comfortable giving me your most ringing endorsement?"

That way, you're signaling your plans and taking responsibility, before making any demands on the recommender's time.

No matter how strong your professional experience may be, there's always room to round out your qualifications, especially if you'll be moving into a different type of setting, e.g. from elementary to high school.

Do you need to take on a certain project?

Learn how to work with a certain type of person?

Spend more time in classrooms?

Ask now and get to work, so it's not an issue later.

ASK FOR A DRAFT TO OPEN THE DOOR FOR CHANGES

When you're actually getting ready to send out applications, you can make the request for a letter. But don't ask for a final letter; ask, specifically, for a draft.

Asking for a draft has several key benefits:

- It opens the door to revisions of all kinds—and you WILL want revisions.
- It gives the writer an “out” if the letter isn't all that great, allowing you to get everything from major weaknesses to minor typos fixed without causing embarrassment.
- It increases the chances that they'll get you something quickly.
- It gives you the flexibility to request adaptations for specific positions.

This last benefit can serve as your justification for asking for a draft, so you don't imply a lack of confidence in the writer.

You might say something like “Since I'll be applying for several positions, could you write a draft for me so I have something generic, and I can get back to you about specific jobs I'm applying for?”

PROVIDE SUGGESTIONS

MAKE IT EASY TO SAY THE RIGHT THINGS

When you ask for a recommendation letter, make it easy on the writer. Don't just say "I need it signed and scanned in PDF format."

Give the writer specific suggestions on which of your professional qualifications they can highlight.

Provide a copy of your most up-to-date résumé; don't assume the writer knows your exact background.

You should also provide a list of projects that you've worked on or responsibilities you've taken on, even if the full list isn't part of your résumé.

Asking for specifics requires a delicate touch, because most people will resent being told what to say. You don't want to be heavy-handed.

Rather than making specific requests, you might say something like "I think some of my qualifications that make me stand out are ___ and ___, so I'll be highlighting them in my cover letter, and if you want to speak to those issues too, that would be great. Since you know about my work on __ and ___, I thought those might be good things to mention, but whatever think will be best."

Again, ask for a draft rather than a signed final copy. That way, you can ask for revisions as needed—either due to weaknesses in the draft, or in response to the criteria for different jobs you're pursuing.

CHECK IN OFTEN

DEADLINES AND DETAILS MATTER

Your recommender has been through this process before, and understands that there will be specific requirements.

For example, they might need to sign the letter and provide it to you in hardcopy, but they may also need to fill out confidential reference check forms or take phone calls. The more you can give them a heads up on what to expect, the better.

Continue to guide your recommender through the process, with frequent check-ins. It's your job to make sure the letter arrives on time.

I'll never forget the story a colleague told me of how her internship supervisor made promises, but failed to submit her recommendation letter on time—and as a result, her application to the district was rejected. Don't let this happen to you.

Always, always communicate about your deadlines, and make sure you have the letter in hand well in advance of when your application is due.

For confidential forms that you don't actually see, don't just ask if they're *willing* to do it; follow up and ask if they've actually submitted it.

Educators are busy people, and it's easy to miss deadlines. It's your job to help your recommender meet the application timelines.

ASK FOR REVISIONS TO GET THE LETTER YOU NEED

In some cases, your recommendation letters will be so good there's no reason to seek any revisions.

That's pretty rare. Most of the time, a recommendation letter could be stronger with revisions, and there may even be red flags you should absolutely weed out.

There are several types of revisions to consider.

The first type is *job-specific* revisions. If you're applying for a high school principal position, you'll want the letter to speak to different aspects of your experience than if you're applying to be an elementary assistant principal. You may also want to ask for revisions based on the school or district context.

The second type is *endorsement-quality* revisions. If you feel that anything is perfunctory, less than flattering, irrelevant, or otherwise concerning, now is the time to say so. Share your specific concerns about how the letter might be interpreted, and clarify the writer's intent. Ask for the revisions you want.

The final type is *copy editing* revisions. Before requesting a signed final copy, make any proofreading edits on a hardcopy and return it for corrections and final printing on letterhead.

Get the letter signed, scan it as a 300dpi PDF, and you're all set.

This process may seem excessive, but it's the only way to guarantee that you get the best possible letter. It also signals your seriousness and commitment—and remember, if you've already asked for opportunities to improve, there should be no surprises.

DON'T STOP AT ONE GET AS MANY LETTERS AS YOU CAN

Your most important recommendation letter—the one that’s nearly always required—is the one from your current supervisor. But that shouldn’t be the only letter you provide, and it may not even turn out to be your best letter.

If you work more closely with someone such as a department head or internship supervisor who isn’t actually your boss, it’s perfectly appropriate to ask for a recommendation letter.

If you’re including a letter written by your university supervisor, terrific—it will most likely be the strongest and best-written letter. Keep in mind, though, that readers will be aware of the writer’s vested interest in your success—so make sure it’s not your only strong letter.

It also doesn’t hurt to have letters from peers who can speak to your qualifications—often the depth in these letters surpasses the depth of letters written by busy administrators. Just be sure they’re writing from firsthand knowledge of your leadership, and not out of affinity or friendship.

The more recommendation letters you can get, the better—not because you should include every letter you get in your application, but because you’ll be able to be more selective about what you include. You may even choose to use different letters in different applications.

Cast a wide net, and do the hard work it takes to get a portfolio of solid recommendation letters.

SAY THANKS

GRATITUDE MATTERS

Finally, when you get the letters you need to land the job you want, say thank you.

Send a card, make a phone call, buy coffee, throw a thank-you dinner—do whatever it takes to convey your gratitude.

And then...

Pay it forward.

When you have interns, teachers, and other aspiring leaders working under your mentorship, do the same for them. Write them quality recommendation letters.

And before they even ask, set them up with the experiences they'll need to get ready.

This is a big job. The profession needs you. Students need you.

Thanks for stepping up, and for helping the next generation of leaders to follow in your footsteps.

WANT MORE? INTERVIEW PRACTICE & COACHING

Now that you've seen the whole process for getting rock-solid recommendation letters, you may be dreading the amount of work involved. You may be thinking it's unnecessary.

But understand this: the ed leadership job search is a competition. If you don't prepare—if you don't put in the work to get the job you want—your competitors will.

I wouldn't have done my job in this document if I left you with the impression that this is a cakewalk. It's not. But it's worth it.

If you're committed to taking your leadership to the next level, and multiplying your impact on student learning, don't miss my 4-part video series:



<http://www.principalcenter.com/ascend>

ABOUT
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**I BELIEVE IN HIGH-PERFORMANCE
INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP.**

As Director of The Principal Center, it's my professional mission to help school administrators transform their productivity and maximize their impact on student learning with strategies, tools, and habits for high-performance instructional leadership. You can find my latest articles, Principal Center Radio interviews, online courses, and more resources like this guide at PrincipalCenter.com.

