Tips on asking a Professor, Principal Investigator, or PhD mentor for a letter of recommendation:

General tips:

- For most professional letters of recommendation, convention bars you from viewing the writer’s actual letter. This convention ensures a level of professionalism between all parties. What this means is that your letter writer will write the letter and then send it via email/mail to an address you give him/her, or upload their letter through an application portal to which you’ve input his/her email address, prompting the system to email him/her directly. Another possibility is that he/she can enclose their letter in an envelope that he/she will sign and return it to you; this is the method for when you’re assembling all materials for the application to send in a packet yourself.
- Don’t feel too anxious about asking for these letters. It’s a convention that everyone goes through at some point. And when letter writers help you get into a program or land a job, it makes him/her look great, too.
- Given the above protocol, it’s important that you first email the person you’d like a letter from to ask if he/she will be willing to write on your behalf. You can also ask him/her for a letter in person, but be sure to follow up any verbal requests with an email so that he/she has a written record of your request.
  - Ask for letters far in advance of any due dates. Aim for asking at least a month before the letter’s due date. Also consider your writer’s schedule during busy times of year (enrollment, the first weeks of classes, midterm/finals season) and keep those times in mind when you plan to write people asking for a letter.
    - If you’re not yet a rising senior, you can send this email now letting your person know that you plan to ask him/her to write on your behalf for your future applications.
    - If you’re using an application portal, ask your potential writer in an email (see below) BEFORE you input his/her email address into the portal. Most application portals automatically send emails asking for letters; if your writer receives this automated email before you have formally asked him/her to write for you, it conveys that you assume he/she will write for you. It’s better to ask him/her directly AND receive his/her consent to write for you before he/she receives any email directing him/her to do so.
  - The initial email: Follow letter writing basics—address the letter with the person’s title; include an initial greeting (tell him/her you hope s/he is well, or hope s/he has had a good summer/break; then tell him/her you’re writing to ask if s/he would be willing to write a letter on your behalf. If the letter if for a program or job, tell them a little about those particulars. If you’d like a letter from him/her for your general use, explain that. If
your due date is soon (as in, within a few weeks), you should include that date in the email to let him/her know you need a quick turn-around.

- **Follow up emails:** if s/he agrees to write on your behalf, that’s great! Thank him/her in your follow up email and let him/her know anything about the position that is relevant: due dates, anything the application mentions you should have your letter writers speak to, etc. You could also ask your writer if s/he’d like you to send your personal statement for the position, or your resume/C.V. to give them more direction about why you want to apply for the position.

- **Follow up emails, cont’d:** Be sure to email reminders to your letter writers to submit their letters—definitely a week before the letter is due. Sometimes applications portals allow you to view whether a letter has been uploaded, so pay attention to that portal if applicable. If s/he still hasn’t written the letter a few days before it’s due, write him/her again or see if you can go by his/her office hours. Be polite but express your concern about your application being received in time.

- **After your writer has written on your behalf:** Purchase or make a small note and handwrite your thanks to him/her for taking the time to recommend you. This is a very important gesture—do not overlook it. You could also keep the writer updated as to the status of your application, as in whether you got the position.

**SHINE specific tips:**

- Everyone in SHINE will receive a letter from his/her mentor, signed also by their PI, detailing the student’s work ethic and contributions to the lab. This itself can be a document you can use as a letter of recommendation. The SHINE Team will email this to you directly as a PDF, so keep it in your records to attach to applications in the future.

- If you’d like a more detailed letter than this paragraph, you can ask Dr. Mills and the SHINE Team to write on your behalf (follow the protocol above to ask for such a letter). The SHINE Team can include more specifics about the SHINE program and speak to other aspects of you that they gleaned from the cohort-wide meetings, other SHINE events, and elsewhere (like your resume). Their letter will also include the paragraph from your PI and mentor in the letter, explained in context of the SHINE program.

- If you’d like a more detailed letter than this paragraph, you can also ask your SHINE mentor and/or PI to write on your behalf. Just follow the tips above. They will probably draw on the existing paragraph that they wrote for SHINE, but will also likely put their letter on USC letterhead. You can also ask them in your email correspondence to include other aspects of you in the letter.

Remember that asking for these letters is an important part of building a professional persona. Be polite when asking, follow up with your writers to thank them, and pay it forward when you get into a position and a student asks you for a letter of recommendation.