Letters of Rec:

This is taken mainly from Nuno Monteiro at Yale University (<http://www.nunomonteiro.org/>)

Should you ask me for a letter?

If you ask me for a recommendation letter, there are three possible outcomes.

1. First, if I know you well; if you have taken one or more courses with me, preferably including at least one seminar; if you received an A or B on a course; if you have worked for me as an RA for a few months or more; if I have supervised your thesis; or if you have otherwise interacted with me in any other capacity that enables me to assess your intellectual potential; then I will be delighted to write you a letter.
2. Second, if I don’t know you at all; if you have never taken a course with me; if we have never interacted in any capacity that enables me to assess your potential; then I will not write a letter for you because I could not write a strong letter — and a weak letter has a high opportunity cost (for both of us) and may end up hurting your application. If you received less than a B on a course you took with me, it is unlikely that I will write you a letter.
3. Third, and this is the murky case, if we have interacted somewhat; if you have, for instance, taken a lecture course with me, but we never really met; or if we have talked briefly once but I cannot in any way assess your potential other than the grade you got on that course; if you received a C or D on a course; then I will be willing to write you a letter but you should understand that my letter will not be particularly strong and will therefore probably not be a plus in your application.

I will let you know honestly which of the three situations you’re in when you ask for the letter, so you should always feel free to ask. In case you are in situation three, I will probably suggest that you try to get someone who knows you better to write a letter for you, but I will be willing to write you a letter — with the caveat above — if you can’t find anyone else.

What do I need from you?

First of all, time. If you want a letter from me, please ask at least one month before the deadline by which the letter will be due. More time is better.

Once I have agreed to write a letter for you, I will need the following from you in one single package (email attachments are OK) at least three weeks before the deadline:

Your Curriculum Vitae;

Hard data: unofficial versions of your transcripts and any standardized test scores relevant for the application at hand (GRE’s, GMAT’s, LSATs);

A list of institutions to which you want the letter to be sent, including the deadline by which each letter has to be in or tell me that the institution will be emailing me with instructions about how to get the letter to them. I cannot send the letter to you personally.

If the letter is for a job or internship, send me a description of the position — I need to know what I am recommending you for.

Other relevant materials included in your application, such as your statement of purpose or research.

A list of bullet points about our previous interaction that you think are germane to the application — this is particularly useful if our interaction was in the distant past, i.e., more than a year ago.

Important note: Whenever there is a form — online or on paper — that must accompany the letter, do fill in as much of my personal information (position, department, contacts, etc.), and yours, as possible before you send it to me.