Episode 77: How to Get Great Letters of Recommendation for Anything

Alison Monahan: Welcome to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're talking about how to get good letters of recommendation for whatever purpose you need one for. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan, that's me, and Lee Burgess. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience so that you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can be.

Together, we're the co-creators of the Law School Toolbox, the Bar Exam Toolbox, and the Catapult Career Conference. I also run the Girl's Guide to Law School. If you enjoy the show, please leave a review on iTunes, and if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can always reach us via the contact form on lawschooltoolbox.com, and we would love to hear from you.

With that, let's get started.

Lee Burgess: Welcome back. Today we're talking about how to get good letters of recommendation, whether you need them for your law school application, clerkship applications, jobs, and so on. So it seems like fundamentally there are two issues here. One is who you ask, and two, what information do they need to do the best possible job for you?

So Alison, should we start with talking about who to ask first? How do you know if someone's gonna be a good recommender, and if they're even willing to help you? And then, you know, we want them of course to write a strong letter of recommendation. We don't want a mediocre one.

Alison Monahan: No, and I think that's a really, really key point.

I think it could be awkward for a lot of people to sort of figure out who they're gonna ask and to make the ask, but one of the things you really have to keep in mind is you've gotta find somebody who's gonna give you a stellar letter of recommendation. So, you know, we talk about who's a good recommender.

Sometimes students think, "Oh, I need like the most prestigious professor or the biggest name professor." And that's great, but that person really also needs to know you and be willing to go to bat on your behalf. Because, I mean, behind the scenes I definitely saw when I was clerking sometimes letters would come in, you know, from applications from our school or whatever, and, you know, the judge might be like, "Oh, do you know this person?"

And sometimes they would bring in the letters of recommendation, and it might be a really big name professor, but, you know, the letter was actually terrible. And that's gonna sink your chances at a job like that.

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Lee Burgess: I think it's interesting, in our other podcast episodes on, you know, resume writing, cover letter writing, and stuff like that, we talk about how you kind of set yourself apart, right?

And how you kind of tell your story. And I think that these letters of recommendation are just another way that your story gets told. If you sound interesting, if the person is interesting to write about you, if they have a connection with you, that's going to make your application stand out. I mean, if it's just basically a template letter of recommendation that they change the name on, it's not really gonna–

It doesn't matter whose name's on it. It's not really gonna do anything.

Alison Monahan: Right. And yeah, I've seen letters that are basically like, "Yes, this person got an A in the class." And it's like, well, you know that from the transcript. What are you adding?

And yeah, maybe it's a big name professor and maybe you got an A, but that person might not be the right recommender for you.

Lee Burgess: And I think that's... An important question is to, you know, to start evaluating who you can actually ask. And, you know, do they even have anything to say about you? I mean, do they know you? Do you have a relationship with them?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. And I think, you know, sometimes you can also be strategic in terms of, say, you need three or four letters of recommendation.

It might be fine to have one, you know, that's that big name, like really well-known professor, whether it's undergrad or law school. You know, the person who shows up in the newspaper and all this stuff that people are gonna have heard of. It might be fine if their letter is essentially, "Yeah, I had this person in my class.

They did really well. They seem like a nice person," you know, whatever. That's not gonna be the strongest letter on earth, but it might still have some bearing coming from that person. But that means your other letters really have to be personal. You know, this has to be someone who has worked closely with you, whether it might be, you know, if you're an undergraduate, like on an honors project or something like that.

If you're in law school, you know, maybe you wrote a note and this person was your note advisor. Like, or, you know, you TA'd for someone and they're gonna

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give you that letter of recommendation, or you did a clinic. But you gotta have somebody who actually really knows you.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that that's completely right, and is interested in this path for you.

I remember one of my undergrad professors who wrote a letter of recommendation for me is a JD PhD. And although he wasn't necessarily the professor who I had the most interaction with all through school, we'd kept in touch, he knew I was going to law school. He was excited that I was going to law school.

We did have a relationship while I was on campus, and he wrote a really great letter of recommendation partly because he's excited about his students attending law school as well, you know?

Alison Monahan: Right. And I think that's something to keep in mind, you know, does this person have the context that they can go and say like, "Yes, I believe that, knowing what I know, you know, as a JD PhD, I know what it takes to succeed as a lawyer or to succeed as a law student." I mean, they don't have to say that outright in the letter, but it's pretty obvious, you know?

Lee Burgess: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: So I know, you know, I understand the characteristics that are required for success in this field, and I believe that Ms. Burgess has these characteristics. Let me tell you more about that.

You know, so if you're thinking about who to ask, I think that's a great point. You know, does this person have the requisite background? You know, if it's a law professor, like did they clerk? Can they say something about like, "Well, when I was a clerk, I know that these are the skills that are required and I feel like this person would do a great job."

You know, it's not just like who are they, it's what do they know, what have they done? Like what can they speak to, basically, with authority?

Lee Burgess: Right. And, you know, are they excited about you? I mean I think you do want... I know when people have asked me to write letters of recommendation, if it's someone that I'm really in their corner and I'm excited about what they're doing, it's such an easier letter to write.

You know, I mean, I realize that sometimes we just have to write letters of recommendations as part of the process of, you know, if you're a professor or if

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you're in a leadership position and you're going to be helping out other folks. But if you have a relationship with someone and you believe in their path, it's much easier to write.

So you definitely wanna make sure that they think whatever you're doing is a good decision and an exciting opportunity.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. And also sort of the question's really like how strongly do they support you?

You know? I mean, this is part of like how well do they know you? But, you know, some cases like you might not realize if someone doesn't actually like you that much.

And one of the things we'll talk about later is kind of how to make the ask and how to figure that out. But I think, you know, people just need to be realistic about: Is this someone who's really gonna go to bat for me? You know, is this somebody who's gonna make those phone calls, who's gonna work their network to make this happen for me?

Or is it someone who's just like, "Well, I was your professor, so I guess I have to say yes"?

Lee Burgess: Right. Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And, you know, you wanna be sensitive about who's really on your team and who's not here.

Lee Burgess: I think that's very true, 'cause like you said, if they are not going to be on your team and cheering for you, may not be worth it to have them on your team.

Well, it's just–

Alison Monahan: Like, I mean, you just don't want a lukewarm letter of recommendation. That's not the point of these.

Lee Burgess: No. You know?

Alison Monahan: Yeah. These are not intended to be necessarily a fully objective, you know, version of you. This is intended to be your absolute best version of you with these people who are like, "I would hire this person for anything if I could have the opportunity." That's the person you want writing the letter.

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Lee Burgess: Yep, exactly. And then there's the practical thing. Does this person have the bandwidth, and will they actually do it?

Alison Monahan: Oh, definitely. There's nothing, like, more of a nightmare than having, like, everything finished and ready to go, and then having that one recommender who is just not getting your stuff done.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: I mean, I don't... Do you have any thoughts about how to sort of suss that out in advance? Like, how can you figure out if this is a slacker professor or not?

Lee Burgess: I mean, I think some professors, if you know them, it can be pretty clear who are the last-minute professors. You know, the professors who talk about writing their exams, like, the night before they have to turn them into the printer.

I had those professors. Not to say that she wouldn't have written a great letter of recommendation, but she probably would've sent it or given it back to you the day that you have to have it sent back. And if you know that you are engaging that professor for this or that former boss or whatever, then you better have some sort of accountability structure to try and do some gentle nudging, to make sure that it does get done, because I think, you know, really busy people, and often very high-performing people, stuff slips through the cracks.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely, and we'll talk about this in detail later. But I mean, you've gotta be realistic. You know, professors procrastinate just like everybody else. They get too busy. And also, I mean, students frankly ask it too late a lot of the time. You know, you don't wanna be that person who rolls in, like, a week before your law school application is due to ask your professor if they can do a letter for you.

You know, you need to plan ahead on this stuff. But, yeah, I mean, you know, if you have that person who's always super flustered, and never getting anything done, and doesn't get comments on exams, and doesn't turn in your grades on time, I think there's a pattern there. So, you know, it's not to say that, like, you can't get them to do it, but you're just gonna have to be aware that it probably will be a lot more stressful and a lot more work than the person who diligently shows up on time, you know, does exactly what they say they're gonna do on the syllabus, plans ahead.

You know, you can just tell a lot of time, like, what type of person you're dealing with.

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Lee Burgess: Yeah, I think that's true. And then when you're picking these people, I think we've already mentioned it a little bit, but really sitting down with whatever application you're doing, whether it be a law school application, clerkship, job, you know, other graduate school opportunity, whatever it might be, and think about your story and who these people are that can kind of support you in all of the areas that kind of tell your story.

So for instance, when I applied to law school, I had worked for a while. So it would've been kind of weird if I had only submitted letters of recommendations from undergrad professors. Because they would've been like, "What's she been doing for the last few years?" You know? And so it was kinda like my story was I still had relationships with these professors from undergrad, but then I definitely had a few different bosses from work who were able to vouch for, you know, what I was able to do outside of the classroom.

I think that's important, you know, and I think you need to think about what your story and application is, and find the people that will support that story, because it's just gonna make all of your experiences much more robust if you've got a variety of perspectives on the different things that you've done.

Alison Monahan: Right, and I also think you have to look at what you're being asked for. I mean, I know, as I recall, like a lot of law schools essentially said, like you could have one letter from your work, but you really need to have, you know, two or three letters from professors who've worked with you.

I mean, I'm trying to remember, 'cause I had a weird background. You know, I had worked and I also had gone to grad school. I think I had mostly like undergrad professors, but I really don't remember, to be honest.

Lee Burgess: I know I at least had one undergrad professor, maybe two, and then I think I at least had two bosses.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, my boss hated me 'cause I quit, so I definitely didn't have the option.

Lee Burgess: Well, I used bosses before the job that I took right before I applied to law school, so.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I'd been doing the same job, like between grad school and law school, and I knew that that wasn't gonna go well when I quit, which it didn't. They tried to fire me after I'd already quit, so. I can't remember what I did, though.

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I mean, I might have had someone else there do one. Or I might have just skipped it.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: And I think maybe I... I can't even remember. I honestly don't remember what I did. But point being, you have choices, you know? And you wanna think about who are you, what are you pitching, who are you pitching it to.

I mean, I would caution people, if you've been out of school for a while, you cannot just send in letters of recommendation from your bosses. Like, you have to find someone who can talk to your academic ability if you're applying to law school. That's just kind of the bottom line.

Which can be hard if people have been out of school for a while. I mean–

Lee Burgess: It can. Yeah. You know, especially if you went to a large university where you didn't necessarily have a lot of interaction with professors. I think you have to maybe start a little on the early end and try and rekindle some of those relationships and put you on their radar.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it might mean that you reach out to them and you're like, "Hey, I'm thinking about doing this," six months before you actually need to apply. And then maybe say, "Hey, you know, you may have forgotten me, basically, but could we meet for coffee?" You know. "I'll bring some of my own old work," that kind of thing.

I mean, hopefully you have some of that. If you're listening to this and you're thinking maybe you'll apply to law school or something in the future, definitely keep in touch with these old professors. Keep your work.

You know, let them know what you're up to. It's never gonna be a bad idea, because, you know, you do have to have that relationship, or otherwise what are they gonna say?

Lee Burgess: It's so true. I mean, an email around the holiday season can go a long way.

Alison Monahan: Here's a little recap of what I've been doing.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, here's where I am, here's what I'm doing. Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Really appreciate all the things that you did for me, you know?

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That knowledge I gained in X class, I applied it this way in my job.

Lee Burgess: If you go to alumni events at your college, you know, take that opportunity to try and go swing by professors' offices. Even if they're not there, you can send them a note saying you swung by, you know, and there're lots of opportunities to continue those relationships.

Alison Monahan: But yeah, I mean, you do wanna have these touch points with people.

And if you're listening to this and you're not sure how to develop those relationships, you know, take a class with, or take more than one class with the same professor, or like try to work with them on something. Try to be a TA, like volunteer together. Whatever it takes to become more than just that random person who sat in the back of the room and never said anything and then did pretty well on the exam.

Lee Burgess: Right. Exactly. Exactly. Okay, so now you've figured out who to ask or you have your pool of people that you wanna ask. Now, what do you do to actually ask them? Do you just say in an email, "Hey, write me this letter of recommendation. It's due in a week"? 'Cause I've gotten those emails, by the way.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's probably not gonna be that well-received. I mean, your ideal process is you start well, well in advance of when you need this.

I personally think it's a good idea to try to set up a meeting and give them a heads-up via email in advance about what you wanna talk about. And the main reason for that is it kind of gives them a chance to sort of think about it, to kind of remember you, and to really think in their heads, like, "Okay, is this somebody that I just would feel comfortable doing this for?"

Because if you spring that on someone in a meeting, I feel like that is not gonna necessarily go that well.

Lee Burgess: It can be a little awkward.

Alison Monahan: Well, it's like they just, you know, it's like, well, wait, why are... I mean, say you're going to office hours as a law student, and you just show up to office hours, and you're like, "Hey, can you write me this letter of recommendation?"

I mean, maybe the answer is an enthusiastic yes, but maybe the professor's more like, "Oh, whoa, I thought we were gonna be talking about personal

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jurisdiction." So I feel like it's a good idea to sort of, you know, just drop an email. "Hey, you know, Professor Burgess, I'm thinking of doing, you know, applying to this clerkship," or whatever it is.

"I would love to have your support in a letter of recommendation. Could I come by your office and talk to you about it?"

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think that's really great. And then everybody has their expectations, and then the professor also knows to think about whether or not they have the bandwidth to do this for you, before that meeting, so they also don't feel backed into a corner and maybe don't agree to do something they don't have time to do.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And, you know, if they wanna get out of it, they can think of a polite way to let you down.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And I think it's also your job to go to that meeting and then really listen to whether or not they're willing to do it and be enthusiastic about it.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think it's absolutely fine to ask that outright.

You know, and I mean, maybe you send the email, and you get this like, "Yes, I'd love to do it." Like, "Come and talk to me." Or you might get nothing or, you know, whatever. You go in, and if they're, you know, kind of hemming and hawing, and like, "Well, you know, it's a really busy time in the semester for me, and I do have that committee that I'm on," and, you know, I think, A, it might be beneficial to just ask them outright, you know, "Do you feel like you could give me a very strong letter, like, given your bandwidth?"

And if they say no, well, great, because you actually found out that you don't want them as a recommender.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: But I think you've gotta give people an out. You know, you've gotta give them some graceful way to exit the situation if you sense that they are not enthusiastic.

Lee Burgess: I think that that's right.

And I think the professors would actually respect you for doing that.

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Alison Monahan: Yeah. I mean, because a lot of people, you know, professors are people. Like, they're reluctant to say no.

But if they're not like, "Yes, I would love to do this" enthusiastically, and like, "Where are you applying? What are you doing?" You know, "What do I need to do?"

I think that's the sign that, you know, something like, "Well, you know, I understand you're really busy this semester, and I realize you don't actually know me all that well. You know, if you feel like maybe I should find someone else, I'd be happy to do that."

I mean, that's hard to say, but it's still better than having someone write you a bad letter that's gonna basically tank whatever you're applying for.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Or, you know, have them write it, but then decide you can't, you shouldn't, you don't wanna use it, and then somebody else use it. I mean, it's just, you just don't wanna waste anyone's time.

Alison Monahan: No. And yeah, I mean, there may be some awkwardness, but you want somebody who's fully on board with you.

Lee Burgess: Okay. So once you've decided that person is actually on board, how do you make sure that it gets done?

Alison Monahan: Well, that's like, you know, the $26,000 question, right? 'Cause lots of people agree to do something, and all of their best intentions, and they don't actually end up doing it, or they don't end up doing it without a lot of hassle.

I mean, you know, I think like with most things, you just... You've gotta have a plan.

You know, before you leave the room, I think you should try to agree on exactly what the next steps are.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I agree, and that's, you know, something that is really important and then should be written down by you on the notepad that you take to this meeting so that like you clearly understand as well what the next steps are.

Alison Monahan: Right, and you might even consider... I mean, I was in a meeting this morning with someone, and they had a... They had their piece of paper, and they actually wrote notes for me. And they gave me those notes.

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Lee Burgess: Oh, that's helpful.

Alison Monahan: You know, so I left that meeting, and I'm like, "Oh, wait. What was I... What were our next steps? What did I agree to? What was I supposed to do? What was, like, the price of this?" And then I just look at the note they gave me, and they had a note for them and a note for me. And, you know, it actually worked out pretty well. I think in this case, I mean, it's not a bad idea to leave them kind of the next steps, but you probably also wanna follow up in an email.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, laying out the next steps.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and also, I mean, I think in the first meeting or, you know, later if you forget, but sort of find out who you can follow up with. 'Cause, you know, a lot of professors, I mean, the person, you know, that I TA'd for and did some letters for me, he was like, "All right. I don't wanna be bothered about this, but I can tell you now I'm going to wait until the last minute.

So what you need to do is follow up weekly with my assistant and see if I've done it yet." And I was fine with that. I was like, "Great. I'll put a note on my calendar every Monday or every Friday, I will send an email to your assistant" being like, "Has this professor started on my letter yet?" And she'll write back and be like, "No, he has not."

I'm like, "Could you please follow up with him?" "Yes." You know?

Lee Burgess: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: You know, you've gotta be really clear on what people need to do, what the deadlines are. I mean, I got an email today, for example, like, from my sister, who someone asked her to write a letter of recommendation, which is not what prompted this podcast.

And she's like, "Oh," like, "I just don't really know, like, how to get started, and I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say." And it's like, "Well, you probably need to go back and talk to this person about this."

Because your job is basically to help them help you.

Lee Burgess: Right. Exactly. Make it as easy as possible for them to help you, which leads really to the next point, which is, what do you need to give them so that they can help you?

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So you shouldn't just give them nothing. They need some sort of materials to go off of. So, you know, what do you think those materials should be?

Alison Monahan: Well, I think your point about what's your story is a really good one.

You know, you want... And sometimes, you know, professors do, people do this a lot, they'll actually ask you.

They'll be like, "Well, what's your story?" You know, what am I trying to convey here? But sometimes you're asking people who don't do this for a living. But you know, you wanna tell them at a minimum sort of what exactly it is that you're applying for. You know, is it different clerkships? Like, if it's clerkships, is it different types of judges?

You know, it might be very different depending on which judge you're applying for. Different jobs. You know, you might want different letters for different types of jobs. And I think any materials that you're planning on submitting can be helpful, you know. Whether it's a cover letter that kind of lays out your story that you're telling, or if it's an application, your application essays, that kind of thing.

And also, really what you want this person to focus on. Because if you have different recommenders, they might be speaking to different aspects of what you're good at.

Lee Burgess: Right. So say it was an employer that was writing this letter of recommendation, and one of the things you really wanted them to highlight was the fact that you had had client-facing experience in your job.

It's totally fair, you know, to say, you know, "Please highlight, you know, my roles and responsibilities, what it was like to work with me, and the fact that, you know, I had client-facing experience, and whether or not you thought I was great at it." You know? So.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, hopefully they did think you were great at it if they're writing your letter.

Lee Burgess: Right. Exactly. But, you know, you can... If you're looking for them to present a specific perspective of you, I think you should ask for it. It actually makes the letters a lot easier to write if people tell you what they're looking for.

Alison Monahan: Oh, absolutely, and I think most people that you ask, if they agree to do it, they wanna do a good job.

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But they need your help to get there. Like, no one's clairvoyant, and they might think like, "Oh, she's asking me because, you know, I can talk about her technical capabilities," and actually you're asking because you want somebody to talk about your client-facing experience. Like, that's a disconnect, that's not gonna present your story in the strongest possible light.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: So, you know, I think whether it's like bullet points or whatever, you know, I think it's absolutely fair to, if there're certain things you would like people to discuss, to suggest that they discuss them.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Exactly. Again, you know, everybody wants this to work for you, but you're really the person who's driving the bus, you know? It's like–

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly.

Lee Burgess: This is your project, and you need to make it as easy for this person as possible to, you know, participate in your project.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, you're steering the ship here.

And if you hit an iceberg, well, you're all gonna go down with the ship, but it's ultimately gonna be your fault.

Lee Burgess: Should we go, like, for a third transportation metaphor?

Alison Monahan: It's a unicycle.

Lee Burgess: No way.

Alison Monahan: It's a tandem bike.

Lee Burgess: Exactly.

Alison Monahan: It's a clown car.

Lee Burgess: It's a cable car.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And you know, I think also, like, some personal, like, anecdotes and stories always make these more interesting, you know? So if it's... Don't just say, like, "Oh, Lee was really great working with clients."

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You know, give an example if they can think of an example of, "Oh, here was an example of a time where she really went above and beyond, and I got a very nice note from the client, like, thanking her for her, you know, amazing work."

That's gonna carry a lot more weight than like, "Yeah, Lee was really good at this".

It's like, okay, well, I don't know. Was she? Or are they just saying that? Like, you know, all these letters should be good.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. It's so true. Can I tell you a funny, totally side-note story that I just think is really entertaining? It's when I worked in PR, I was doing a lot of client calls, and I was working in political PR.

And one of our clients just never could remember my name, and had decided I had a totally different name, like, it was like Pippa or something like that. I mean, it was not even close to Lee. And he would write these notes to my boss about how much he liked working with, like, Pippa.

Alison Monahan: Your boss was like, "Who's Pippa?"

Lee Burgess: "Who's Pippa?" But it was so funny, 'cause we just all thought it was hilarious that, I mean, I don't have that complicated of a name, you know, to remember. But there was this phantom assistant that they loved. But it was always my work, and so we just joked that if anything went bad, it was gonna be Pippa's fault, not mine.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. So I guess that's a key thing, make sure this person knows your name and how to spell it.

Lee Burgess: Yes.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I remember in high school we had a teacher who was, like, known for writing just amazing letters of recommendation, and she gave them to us for some reason. I don't know why. But, you know, so everybody, like, had her write one, and we're like, "Oh".

And you read it, and you're like, "Oh," you know, it's like, "Alison is so great at this and that." And like, she wrote this, like, thing that was so amazing, that you're like, "Oh, God, I'm so... Like, this is the best letter ever." And then you started comparing with your friends and realized she only had, like, three letters that she just reused and put different names on.

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And in that case, she was actually very particular. This is another thing people need to consider when considering who to ask. Sometimes people will not write multiple letters or, like, only a certain number of letters to the same institution or to the same judge. So sometimes if you get turned down, it's not necessarily it's your fault, it's just that somebody else got there earlier and they're applying to the same judges.

And understandably, if you have your one set letter, you don't wanna reuse it for, like, three people with the same judge.

Lee Burgess: Right. And if the judge is your friend from law school, as a professor, you can't send in 15 letters of recommendation for a clerkship spot. That would be a little odd, I think.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I mean, they're gonna have to pick one or two, and be like, "This is my best student of the year".

Yeah, and, you know, the other thing is to get people to know, or to actually do the stuff, they've gotta know exactly what to do. Like, what's the process?

If it's a clerkship, you know, your school probably has some way of submitting the letters.

If it's law school applications, I think they submit them to LSAC. You know, but whatever it is, it's your responsibility to make sure that you make it as easy as possible. You know, that you send a detailed email or whatever it is. Don't just send them the webpage and be like, "Here are the instructions".

You know, really walk them through the process of, like, this is what you need to do, this is the timing. You know, let me know if you have any questions or problems or anything like that. Otherwise, they might just well not do it.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, and if they do have some sort of an assistant or someone like that helping them manage their life, make sure the assistant has a copy of everything too, because it's likely that assistant's gonna be the person who's actually submitting the letter.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and you wanna be friendly with that person.

You know, you might wanna get them a coffee occasionally or something. You know, because you're probably gonna end up having to harass them a little bit. And again, like, you can't be an entitled asshole about this, you know? You need to be–

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You're in a humbling position, and you need to act that way with the assistant, 'cause I can guarantee you that whoever's assistant, you know, you're dealing with, they talk to the person they work for.

And they might be willing to do you a favor and go in one day when, you know, the person who's gonna do your letter happens to be there and seems to be a little bored, and maybe has 20 minutes, and they can, like, do this.

But you want them on your team.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think that that's really true. All right, so what if the person, either the boss or the professor, doesn't really do this very frequently? Perhaps it's a newer professor and they don't have a lot of experience, or someone who's new to a supervisory role. How can you help them figure out what's expected?

Alison Monahan: Well, I think it's helpful, if you can, to try to provide some sample letters. Or at least at a minimum, some guidelines. You know, like when I got this email from my sister, I was like, "Well, what is the school asking for? Have you looked at the website to see?" I mean, granted, she should not be having to do this.

But, you know. And so she went and looked. She's like, "Oh yeah, they're asking this, this. You know, they want this." But I think, you know, she was sort of Googling around on the internet trying to find sample letters. You may not be able to find them, but if you have a model that someone else has used that you think is a good model of just even basic stuff, like formatting or how do you open a letter, how long should it be. You know, I think providing any guidelines you can is only gonna help.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think that that's really true. I think it's just important to remember that if somebody agrees to do this for you, it's more likely than not they want to help you and they want to do a good job.

So like most things, anything you can do to make their job easier is just gonna help you get there.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. And 'cause again, like you want all this stuff to sound, you know, harmonious. To sound, you know, if your whole application to law school is about how you wanna do public interest work, and they're talking about what a great job you did, you know, raising money at the fundraiser, like maybe that's a little incongruous.

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Maybe not. You know, you can spin that story into like, "Oh, and this person would be a great leader of an organization because they know how to fundraise."

But it's gotta have the right tone.

Lee Burgess: Right. Exactly.

Alison Monahan: You can't be like, "Yeah, they're the most amazing capitalist I've ever seen." You're like, "Actually, that's not really what my story is."

Lee Burgess: No, but we've definitely interviewed plenty of folks who run nonprofits, and you do have to be willing to fundraise. So for the right position, that could actually be a good thing.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it's just like they've gotta know how to spin it.

All right. Well, here's a question.

I've sometimes, you know, heard or been in the situation where someone's like, "Oh, you know, I'd love to help you out. That sounds great. Total supporter. I don't really have time to do this. Can you write the letter yourself?"

Lee Burgess: Yeah, this is always really awkward.

Alison Monahan: Yeah.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I mean, I think it's not a good idea to write the whole letter yourself.

But maybe go back to bullet points and kind of spoon feeding for them a little bit what they wanna do to just make their job as easy as possible. I don't know, what do you think?

Alison Monahan: I think it's awkward. I mean, I don't think it's really a totally fair thing for someone to ask. I mean, I think they think they're being helpful.

I mean, it's super awkward, let's face it, to write a letter about yourself, how great you are.

Lee Burgess: Yes.

Alison Monahan: You know? Maybe you can tag team with some friends and kind of like, you know, come up with something. I mean, you know, ultimately I think you have to decide is this a person that you want to have doing your letter, you know?

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If they're super high profile and they do know you, they just don't feel like dealing with it, and they're willing to sign off on whatever you want, I mean, maybe that's okay. I don't think it's, like, necessarily an ethical issue or anything like that. But it's just a weird situation. So, you know, I think it's fine too to go to that person and be like, "You know, I really appreciate your willingness to do this, but I'd rather actually find somebody else."

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I think that that's totally fine. Or kind of find a middle ground. I could see starting kind of the template, and then, you know, asking them to insert certain anecdotes or specific thoughts so it would still be faster for them. But I think you have to just decide what you're comfortable with.

You know, if you can't write a glowing recommendation about yourself, then that shouldn't be one of your letter of reference of recommendation.

Alison Monahan: Well, and I think it's also just like it's probably just gonna sound weird 'cause it's gonna sound like your application essay or whatever. You know? It will.

It's gonna sound like your cover letter. That's why I think, like, bringing somebody else into it to, like, sort of brainstorm or whatever. I don't know. I think that's an awkward situation to put people into, but it definitely does happen.

Lee Burgess: It does. Yeah. And then what if people just end up flaking and not doing it at all?

Alison Monahan: Well, that's, yeah, disaster waiting to happen. I mean, one thing you can do to try to ward that off in advance is if you have a range of letters that you're allowed to submit, go for the higher end of that range.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's true.

Alison Monahan: You know? If they're like, "Submit three to five letters," ask for five.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, it's true, and it's not even just because somebody flakes. I mean, crazy stuff happens, you know?

Alison Monahan: Oh, yeah. Illnesses–

Lee Burgess: Family stuff, you know, elder parents, like, kids get sick. I mean, the list goes on and on and on and on. And so I think it's always best to hedge your bets. And, you know, maybe even ask for that fourth letter, you know, because you may need to call on them to put it in.

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Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think, too, like, you don't want this to be a last-minute type of situation where you are not aware that this might be happening.

Which, again, goes back to setting those early deadlines. Like, you know, do not tell your recommenders the actual deadline.

I mean, they might go find out themselves, but don't tell them.

You know? If your stuff is due January 1st, tell them it's due December 15th.

And then ask them for a first draft by December 1st, or ask them to at least have a draft. You know, you don't need to see it, but, you know, basically you want to send an email like, "Hey, you know, just wanna make sure that draft was coming along okay."

And if they're not responding and you don't hear from them, at least you have a couple weeks to try to figure something out.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. I also think if somebody is, like, not responding to your emails or you're having a tough time reaching out to them, I do think it's fine, especially if you're in school and this is a professor, to just swing by their office or swing by their assistant's office or desk and just try and find out what's going on.

I think it's so easy, one, for emails to get lost in the darkness that can become our inbox.

Alison Monahan: For sure.

Lee Burgess: But, you know, but also, you know, if I... Let's say I've put something off. Never would happen. I mean, I never put things off.

Alison Monahan: You're very on top of everything.

Lee Burgess: But, you know... I'm totally on top of everything.

But, you know, but I flag it, and then it just, like, moves further, further down my inbox, or it didn't make it onto my to-do list. And then maybe a second email comes in, and then I'm embarrassed because you haven't gotten the first one, and then you don't respond to that one. And then somebody's feeling really neglected, but it's actually just that they're on my mind.

I'm just kind of–

Alison Monahan: Out of it.

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Lee Burgess: You know, but if they, like, send me a quick message or they run into me, I'll be like, "Oh my gosh, you're totally on my radar. I was just waiting to have something to send back to you." Then that's gonna make you like feel so much better about the situation than just sitting there and kind of brooding about why they haven't emailed you back.

I think email can be such a tough medium sometime because–

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I don't think you can rely on email in a situation like this. Like, if somebody's not responsive and they haven't done what they said they were gonna do, it's time to pick up the phone, it's time to stop by, it's time to get in touch with their assistant.

It's, you know, time to send like whatever, you know? Like, you gotta be a little more pro... well, I mean, you've gotta be proactive. You know, these are your letters. This is your project. This is your life. And yeah, people agreed to help you, but, you know, everybody's super busy, and there's a good chance that they're not gonna be totally on top of this, and that's just something you need to plan around from the start.

And not wait until the last minute to find out that all four of your recommenders have decided to, like, leave the country simultaneously and forgotten to write your letters.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, that's not a good situation to be in. So, like most things, you have to think ahead. You have to own the process, and it's your responsibility to be organized and be on top of what's going on, so you're not into a situation where you're surprised that nothing got done.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, you have to nag, but politely.

Lee Burgess: Yes, because they are busier than you are, even though you think you're super busy, and they're doing you a favor. So.

Alison Monahan: Exactly, and then, you know, a lot of people have real-life responsibilities. Like, if your kid is in the hospital or something, writing a letter of recommendation is probably not at the top of your, like, mind at that point.

Lee Burgess: No. Yeah, and I think that's something that I... When I was younger... Now I just feel like I'm saying, "Back in my day," when... But I didn't really appreciate how, I mean, almost anyone we talk to in their 30s and older has some sort of family thing going on, you know, elder parents, kids, pets, home, jobs, spouses.

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Like, the list goes, you know, on and on and on and on, I think, as we get older. And so you do just have to realize that sometimes, you know, a professor's life might be complicated, and they're juggling quite a few things, and be respectful of that.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, but also, you know, if they agreed to help you, they wanna help you.

And so follow up. Let them help you. Make them help you. Or at least find out. You know, at some point you may have to ask. Like, "Look, I really feel like this isn't, you know, isn't gonna be possible. That's totally fine. I just need to know that."

And then you figure out what else to do, and you scramble.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. But better scrambling–

Alison Monahan: Well, unfortunately with that... What?

Lee Burgess: Oh, no, I was just gonna say better scrambling than not having a letter of recommendation.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. Well, unfortunately with that, we are out of time. So if you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox Podcast, please take a second to leave a review and rating on iTunes, because we would really appreciate it.

And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. Our new episodes come out on Monday. If you have any question or comments, don't hesitate to reach out to Lee or Alison at lee@lawschooltoolbox.com or alison@lawschooltoolbox.com, or you can always contact us via our contact website form, website contact form at lawschooltoolbox.com.

Sorry, everyone. Been a long day. Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon. And good luck on those letters of recommendation.