

Letters of Recommendation: Who to ask, what to give them.

Why is this important: Nearly every graduate program requires applicants to submit letters of recommendation. Don't underestimate the importance of these letters. While your transcript, standardized test scores, and personal statement/admissions essay are vital components to your graduate school application, an excellent letter of recommendation can make up for weaknesses in any of these areas. A well written letter of recommendation provides admissions committees with information that isn't found elsewhere in the application. A letter of recommendation is a detailed discussion, from a faculty member, of the personal qualities, accomplishments, and experiences that make you unique and perfect for the programs to which you've applied.

Who to ask: Consider faculty members, administrators, internship/co-operative education supervisors, and employers. The persons you ask to write your letters should

- know you well
- know you long enough to write with authority
- know your work
- describe your work positively
- have a high opinion of you
- know where you are applying
- know your educational and career goals
- be able to favorably compare you with your peers
- be well known
- be able to write a good letter

Keep in mind that no one person will satisfy all of these criteria. Aim for a set of letters that cover the range of your skills. Ideally, letters should cover your academic and scholastic skills, research abilities and experiences, and applied experiences (e.g., co-operative education, internships, related work experience).

Approaching your letter writers: When you approach potential referees, ask if they know you well enough to write a meaningful letter. Pay attention to their demeanor. If you sense reluctance, thank them and ask someone else. Remember the following:

- Ask early in the semester
- Ask in person if possible
- When asking, describe why you are applying, and discuss with them what they think about this decision

Provide Information to your letter writers: The best thing that you can do to ensure that your letters cover all the bases is to provide your referees with all the necessary information. Don't assume that they will remember anything about you. (I know, you're quite memorable, but think about what it must be like to have 150 or more students each semester!) Assume that your letter writer will remember nothing. Provide all information that you think may be helpful or that you would like to have appear in the letter of recommendation.

Include a folder with the following neatly organized within:

- Transcript
- Admissions essays
- Curriculum Vitae which documents the following:
 - research experiences
 - internship and other applied experiences
 - honor societies to which you belong
 - awards you've won
 - work experience
 - professional goals
 - due date for the application
 - copy of the application recommendation forms
- Cover letter and spreadsheet documenting the following:
 - programs you are applying to
 - contact information for the individual to which the letter is to be sent
 - due date of the letter
 - mailing instructions
 - pre-addressed stamped envelopes

NOTE: Three to four weeks notice is a recommended minimum amount of time to provide to letter writers. Be sure to schedule an appointment to provide these files to your letter writers.

Confidentiality The recommendation forms supplied by graduate programs require you to decide whether to waive or retain your rights to see recommendation. As you decide whether to retain your rights, remember that confidential letters tend to carry more weight with admissions committees. In addition, many faculty will not write a recommendation letter unless it is confidential. Other faculty may provide you with a copy of each letter, even if it is confidential. If you are unsure of what to decide, discuss it with your writer.

Deadline Approaches: As the application deadline approaches, check back with your referees to ensure that the letters were sent on time (but don't nag!). Contacting the graduate programs to inquire whether your materials were received is also appropriate.

What if I take time off? Though a few years may have passed since you graduated college, you should try contacting your professors. Professors keep records on students for years, so you might be pleasantly surprised to find a professor or two who can write on your behalf.

You may also consider: Ask a supervisor or employer to write on your behalf. A supervisor can write about your work ethic, enthusiasm, maturity, and life experience. The trick is ensuring that your referee understands what graduate admissions committees are looking for in applicants. Provide your referee with all the information he or she needs to write an excellent letter. Include a description of your work-related experiences, why you wish to attend graduate school, your skills and abilities -- as well as examples of how your current work demonstrates those skills and abilities.

If you are considering graduate study, but may take time off, it can be a good idea to contact the faculty prior to leaving your undergraduate institution. Inform them that you may contact them in the future for a letter. Be sure to keep in touch with them after you graduate.

Source: Adapted from
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