

So You Want to go to Grad School

In my classes I tend to “sell” grad school to anyone who can get in and at the same time get it paid for [preferably by others]. As a consequence, I often get asked to write letters of recommendation for my former students. This document describes how to make that happen.

Waive the Right to View

I don’t submit letters to schools where you do not waive the right to review the materials. If I agreed to write a letter, I’ll ask you to resubmit with that right waived. If you don’t trust me to write a letter you don’t see, don’t ask me to write a letter. Ask one of your other instructors, but I suspect you may not find many takers on this.

CoAM

If I put you in front of CoAM, please don’t ask me for a letter without a very frank and probably very uncomfortable in-person discussion with me first. I’m not allowed to mention CoAM in a letter, but if you wind up taking my class twice – something that shows up on your transcript – I can mention that. Just so we are clear: I am not likely to be enthusiastic.

Start with Decent Grades

I have recommended (with reservations) students who got B’s in my class and never ranked above 50% compared to their peers in any of the three classes they took from me. That’s rare –they **did** get into graduate school – but I had a true story I could tell about their progress and their likelihood of success. If you got an A or A- in one of my classes, this is probably under control. If you got some form of B we could easily be able to work the issue – see “story” below. I haven’t had anyone who got a C from me ask for a recommendation. I won’t rule it out, but we will certainly talk at length before you get a “yes” from me.

It Really Helps if I Know You

It’s OK if you have to remind me of who you are. I teach upwards of 150 new students each semester and about the time I start to get to know them, they move on to other classes. To jog my memory, you want to be able to tell me the story of how we interacted in class and office hours so that I know that I’m writing about the correct student. I won’t be able to give a glowing recommendation if all you did was show up, do the labs, take the tests, and get an A- or an A. [I’ve taught students like this.] The forms ask if I know you well enough to give a recommendation – and my professional credibility is on the line.

It Really Helps if I Can Tell Your Success Story

My letters follow a particular formula. The first paragraph opens with what you took from me, what grade you got, and what % ranking that put you in my class. I run the % number two ways; in your section and across all sections that semester. I use the higher ranking. I also toss in there any other straightforward factual stuff – such as referencing your awesome GPA for those who have one. If you've got publications, let me know of them. If you've done research, I need to know who advised it. I toss as many great facts in there as I can lay hand to.

The second paragraph is where I tell your success story. I once had a student who, shall we be charitable, did not learn at high speed. They were the most motivated and tireless student I have ever taught and they were not dumb. They asked questions until they understood and then they went off and came up with more questions and they asked those and never once did they back off or give any impression of getting tired. In short, they were the most awesomely determined student I've ever encountered. Their success story was easy to tell, easy to illustrate. I could talk about them as a person and about their judgement and I made sure that I spelled perseverance right. It works best if I can tell your success story.

I have taught students who faltered in my classes and then recovered in later classes. I ask them to go to their other instructors for a letter. I'd only seen them in the "faltering" phase. I never got to see them turn themselves around and get their stuff together and make something of their undergrad career. I told them that I couldn't write the letter they needed written. Their success story was not mine to tell.

So I need authentic stuff for that second paragraph. Were you helpful in small groups? Were you the one who answered piazza questions faster than me and the graders? Did you come up with a script to make life easier for your peers? I try to pay attention to a lot of this stuff because I'm searching for new graders as my current ones graduate, but you need to keep your own diary of why you are great and why you were great in my class.

It really helps if you do some Undergraduate Research

Even if you only intend to apply for +1 year masters degree, this applies. Like any job, folks want to see that you can do what will be expected of you. So do undergraduate research to show that you can do research. This item has a certain amount of lead time, so start on it right away – semesters before you apply.

University links:

<https://ugresearch.osu.edu/>

And the subpage with postings:

<https://ugresearch.osu.edu/research-postings>

Their general contact email is ugresearch@osu.edu

Department Links

<https://cse.osu.edu/current-students/undergraduate/undergraduate-research>

It would be worth your time to look at the department website and walk the list of tenure-track faculty and see what their research topics are.

If you take a class from ANY tenure track professor, ask them for a letter.

Be sure to mention to me if you have done any research.

It also really helps to get published

This is hard to arrange, but if you are working with researchers or similar folks, see if your name can go on the authors list for any scholarly works that get produced. As above, it is a clear signal to the grad committee that you are grad material when your name is on something that got published. You might just be the lead authors “data and computer person” but sometimes that means you can contribute in a way that gets your name on that list of authors. Be sure to mention to me.

It's Not Yes without an Interview

I need to talk to you in person or on Zoom (with a camera on) before making a decision. We need to get me reminded of who you are and what you did and the story that I can tell. You need to tell me what your plans for grad school are and we need to talk about what you want to study. You need to prep us both by putting together “the package” as noted below. Then schedule some time.

English

I don't get any technical writing in CSE 2421 but I do in CSE 3902 on your take-home final exam. Be ready to email me that thing. My third paragraph is about English skills that I have observed. Often I can't comment on written English, but with that take-home final I can. Your publications list will suffice as a way to show your technical writing skills if you have published anything.

The Package

Send this to me as part of asking for an interview:

- A picture of yourself showing your face. There's a reason why I mandate a profile picture in remote classes. If your profile picture was a cat and you never turned your camera on, we may have a major issue.
- For every class you took from me:
 - What semester
 - What time of day the class met
 - Your grade

- Tell me everything about you that I might have observed you doing. You're trying to get me to say, "Oh! You were one of the ones who..."
- Tell me why you are great. See "Success Story" above. You know yours better than anyone else.
- It would be nice to have a look at your advising report, but that's **optional**. I don't know that you have a 3.99+ until you show me. I might only have you for one class; I'd like to be assured that your good grade was not a fluke. I started asking for this after a student volunteered theirs showing the most awesome GPA I'd seen in decades.
- Tell me what you want to study in grad school, even if you are somewhat unsure.
- I need your pronouns so that I get them right.

I'm in Your Class

Please don't ask while you are in one of my classes (you can hint that this is coming, but decisions get made after grades get posted). I need to know that final grade in order to write the letter. Maybe if you are a graduating senior, but otherwise wait until the semester ends. Be sure to collect and write down all of the kinds of things mentioned above. Show some behaviors that speak well of you that I might notice. It's OK to tell me that you might ask for a letter as a way of saying "please watch me" but that's not a promise that I will be able to. After grades are posted, it's worth talking to me about this stuff. By talking to me right after the semester and before I start learning 140 new names, you stand a good chance that I still recall you and the semester. It's OK to schedule time and come in and ask me to take notes for a letter that you might ask for a year later. [I may regret saying that. So far I've not ever regretted saying that.]