

Guidelines for Students Requesting Letters of Recommendation

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This document outlines the steps undergraduate students should follow for requesting a letter of recommendation from me for graduate school or employment. This request must be made via email at least **six weeks** before the application deadline.

For students applying to a PhD program (especially in economics), my letter of recommendation will be a straightforward and direct assessment of your ability to succeed in a PhD program. It is particularly important that you have the appropriate background—with high grades, usually an A- or an A—in mathematics and statistics as well as upper-level economics courses. Appropriate training in mathematics and statistics will typically include calculus, linear algebra, differential equations, real analysis, and a course in mathematical statistics.

Broadly speaking there are two factors that are relevant for admission to a PhD program in economics or a closely related field. First, candidates need to demonstrate an ability to succeed in the first year, which includes courses in microeconomics (see *Microeconomic Theory* by Andreu Mas-Colell, Michael D. Whinston, and Jerry R. Green), macroeconomics (see *Advanced Macroeconomics* by David Romer), and econometrics (see *Econometric Analysis of Cross Section and Panel Data*, by Jeffrey M. Wooldridge). This is done through a combination of performance on the GRE and in advanced mathematics, statistics, and economics courses. It is also important to choose letter writers who can speak to your specific ability in this regard in the classroom as well as outside of coursework.

Second, candidates need to demonstrate an aptitude for and interest in doing research. This is very field-specific, where people who do research in economic theory, econometrics, international trade, labor economics, economic history, etc, combine a different (sometimes very different!) set of skills and interests. Before applying to a PhD program in economics you should familiarize yourself with recent research papers in your potential fields of interest. You can do this by looking at the [NBER Working Paper series](#). Although test scores and course grades are useful for evaluating this aspect of your potential, it is particularly important to choose letter writers who can speak to your research interests and aptitude. The most common activities for evaluating research potential include writing a senior thesis and/or working as a research assistant, but may also include other experiences or activities.

Finally, admission to a “top” PhD program in economics is very competitive, and requires scoring very highly on the GRE, having very high grades in advanced economics, mathematics, and statistics, and having very strong letters of recommendation. I am happy to provide feedback on the best fit of PhD programs and/or whether pursuing a PhD in economics is the right choice for you.

For students applying to other programs (including an MA, JD, or MBA) or a job, my letter of recommendation will make the best case that I can for your suitability. Importantly, the more I know about you from your participation in my courses, discussion in office hours, and through other interactions, the better placed I will be to make a strong case for your candidacy. I encourage you to think carefully about whether I am the right letter writer based on my knowledge—usually as demonstrated by taking a course with me—of your unique skills, interests, and goals. Simply having performed well in one of my courses does not usually provide enough material for a compelling letter of recommendation.

At the time of your request you must provide the following materials:

- A resume or vitae.
- An unofficial transcript and summary of the most relevant courses (with grades).
- The unofficial results of the relevant standardized tests (e.g., GRE, GMAT, LSAT).
- The personal statement or writing sample that will be part of the application.
- **In addition,** I require a “statement of understanding” that provides details about the academic program or job posting to which you are applying. This statement should clearly state the admissions requirements or prerequisite skills for the relevant program or job and your qualifications (including specific details from your academic or work experience). The statement should also provide a clear statement of your core interests, ultimate goals, and why the specific program(s) or job(s) you are applying to are a good fit. You should also articulate why you think I am the right person to provide a recommendation for the specific program(s) or job(s) using specific examples from taking my courses or our interactions outside of the classroom.
- **Finally,** and only if my recommendation will be for a PhD program, you should provide a brief 1-2 paragraph summary of three research papers that reflect your current interests in pursuing a PhD.