# Good Letters of Recommendation

**By Duane Buhrmester, the University of Texas at Dallas (2002).**

Everyone eventually needs letters of recommendation. If you plan to find a job right after you complete your bachelor's degree, you will need letters to give to potential employers. If you are going on to graduate school for a masters or doctoral degree, you will need letters during the admissions process. Good letters of recommendation can greatly enhance your application and may compensate for weaker grades, test scores, and so on. Weak or superficial letters from the wrong type of recommenders can undermine your application. Overtly negative letters of "recommendation" can sink your application.

Different types and "levels" of letters are needed depending on what you are applying for. If you are applying to top-10 USA Ph.D. clinical psychology programs, then ideally you need at least two strong letters from tenure-track faculty whom you have worked with on research; it would be great if another letter can come from a practicing Ph.D.-level psychologist whom you have worked with as a volunteer or intern. Because admissions to less prestigious programs are somewhat less competitive, letters won't need to be quite this high-powered. Similarly, when GPA and GRE scores reach the upper stratospheres, then stellar letters wane somewhat in importance. If you are applying to a masters-level counseling or social work graduate program, then letters from research-oriented faculty are not necessarily important; letters from faculty who can attest to your strength as a student and letters from professionals (at least masters-level) you worked with as a volunteer or intern should do the trick. If you are applying for a bachelor-level job, then letters from past employers and other professionals who are familiar with your skills that are relevant to the job are most important. In other words, think sensibly about who will read the letters, what kind of information they need to know, and who (in terms of letter writers) they will want to hear from.

There are three major steps to getting good letters: pay your dues, ask the right people the right way, and supply convenient ammunition.

**Working toward Good Letters (Paying Your Dues)**

Strong letters don't just magically appear. **Good letters are cultivated through intelligent planning, enthusiastic involvement, and good old-fashioned hard work.** Here are two examples from my own experience that illustrate this point.

First (bad) example. One day a student walks into my office and asks if I'm willing to write him a letter of recommendation for a doctoral graduate program. I say, "I'm always happy to help students out, but I'm not sure that I'm your best choice as a letter writer. I really don't know you well enough to write the type of strong, in-depth letter you want." Undissuaded, the student presses ahead saying, "Well, I really don't know any of my professors much better than you, so I'd greatly appreciate it if you would consider writing me a letter." I subtly shake my head and say, "Well, okay, but let me tell you what the letter will say." Pulling out my grade book, I ask "Now, what is your name?" (needless to say, this is not a good sign) and then go on to look up the student's grade. I then told the student what the letter would say:

> "It is a pleasure to recommend Johnny Comelately for admission to your graduate program. I came to know Johnny as a student in an Introduction to Psychology course I taught last spring. Johnny did well in the class, ranking in the top 12 of 130 students in the class. Although the large class size did not permit much individual contact, I do remember that he was one of the more outspoken students in class, raising interesting questions. Like all our fine students here at UTD, I recommend him for admission to your program."

To my mild astonishment, the student looked satisfied and commented that he thought I wrote well. I politely shrugged my shoulders and agreed to write the letter for him.

He did not get into graduate school. This is not the sort of letter that you want. It is superficial and vacuous. As a member of an admissions committee, I would **translate it as saying,** "Sorry, but I really don't know this student well enough to seriously recommend him to your program."

Second (good) example. One day after I had just extolled students in my Intro Psychology class about the benefits of getting involved with faculty as preparation for graduate admissions, Sara came up and asked how she could get involved with my research. I told her that I was conducting a study the next semester where I needed help from undergraduate assistants to go out to children's home to interview family members and administer questionnaires. She enthusiastically followed up and joined my research team the next term. She was great. She learned the procedures quickly, had lots of useful suggestions, got her work done ahead of schedule and wrote an interesting, well-crafted paper. I was impressed. She then came back and asked for more, wanting to know if she could do her own research. I told her she should do an honors thesis (her GPA was 3.95), which she did by piggy-backing some additional measures on my larger study. The thesis was a great piece of research; it was accepted as a poster at a national convention in San Diego (which was a fun place to go!) and was eventually published (several years later) in a professional journal. I was even more impressed. Because of family circumstances, she knew that she would have almost a year off between gradation and graduate school. I knew this too, so I hired her as my lab Project Coordinator. Again, she was fantastic. She would have things done even before I had thought to tell her that they needed to be done. I still miss her.

When Sara finally asked me to write a letter of recommendation for graduate school, I was delighted (actually, drooling). It read like:

> "It is a true pleasure to recommend Sara for admission to your graduate program. Let me say at the outset that, simply put, Sara is one of the best two students I've had the pleasure of working with over the past 10 years. (The other student has gone on to become a rising star assistant professor at a major university.) She is someone you will undoubtedly want in your program and should offer competitive financial support to attract……I know Sara extremely well, having contact with her as a student in class, as a research assistant, as a thesis advisee, as an employee and as a co-author. In each of these capacities she excelled…….Sara is extremely smart…..writes and thinks well….motivated to put in long hours…..truly curious and research-oriented….works well with others on a team….has native clinical skills….is ambitious….."

The letter was nearly three single-spaces long giving concrete examples and glowing evaluations. It ended with a statement that basically said that the admissions committee would be crazy not to let her in.

She got in to every program she applied to. Several of them were top-ten programs. It did not hurt that she had 1330 GRE's, a 3.95 GPA and equally as strong letters from another faculty member and a community professional. None the less, this is the kind of letter you want if you have high ambitions. Obviously, it is extraordinary to get a letter like this (only 2 in ten years!) You may not need this strong of a letter to get to where you want to go, but it is important to know that there are people who get letters like this.

Now, the main point here is that you can not just plod through college with a narrow focus on doing well on exams and papers and expect faculty or other professionals to know you well enough to write a meaningful letter of recommendation. If Sara had not gotten involved with me in research, then her letter would have sounded only slightly less vacuous than the first example. You must get involved outside of class to gain the kinds of experiences that will cultivate good letters of recommendation.

**More than One Way to Peel a Potato.** It would be a mistake to suggest that the only or even best way to do this is through research involvement with faculty. Some students do not especially like or are not good at, research. If you fall in this latter group, then don't feel compelled to force yourself to work in a professor's lab just to "earn" a good letter of recommendation. There are other ways to get involved with faculty. One of the easiest is to take advantage of faculty office hours. It is a misconception to think that office hours are only for "dummies" who don't understand the course material. Almost all professors got into the business of higher education because they thrive on intellectual stimulation. Most of us love it when an intellectually curious student comes in just to "bounce ideas back and forth." I know that this is what distinguished me as an undergraduate. I attended a small northwestern liberal arts college where the faculty did not do research. I got to know a few faculty extremely well by regularly finding time outside of class to challenge and explore their thinking (and mine). It was great intellectual fun! Almost as an unintended by-product, they ended up writing me strong letters of recommendation.

You can also get to know faculty by being active in student organizations, working for faculty as a teaching assistant, taking small seminar-size classes, doing an independent study, or doing a senior thesis under the supervision of a faculty member. Anything you can do to expose more of your strengths to letter writers will help. The sorts of things you want to show them are that you think clearly, write clearly, work well with others, are hard working, are curious, are ambitious, and so on. They must have seen these traits in action if they are to write about them in a letter.

**Ask the Right People the Right Way**

Who should you ask to write letters of recommendation? Well, like most things, the answer depends on a number of considerations. First, it depends on what the letters are for. If you're applying to a top-10 Ph.D. program, then you'll want to get high-powered letters from high-profile professors who can say something meaningful about your scholastic and research promise, but if you are going after bachelors-level jobs, then letters from high-profile professors about your research acumen aren't necessary or even appropriate.

Here is a good rule of thumb. If possible, the professional level of your letter writers should be at, or slightly above, the level of the professional who will be reading the letters. For example, having a Ph.D.-level professor write a letter that will be read by an admissions committee composed of Ph.D.-level professors makes sense. All these Ph.D.s share a core set of values and talk the same lingo when it comes to reading and writing letters; they also know about the appropriate comparison group: the large number of other graduate-school hopefuls. It makes far less sense to leave it up to a bachelor-level internship supervisor, a family physician, or a part-time university instructor to convince an admissions committee of Ph.D. professors that you have the scholastic ability and research-orientation needed for a top clinical psychology Ph.D. program. Now, these latter writers might be just fine if you are applying to a local master-level counseling or social work program. If you are going after a bachelor-level job, then letters from past employers in related businesses are best; these employers may be turned off by "ivory tower" letters written by out-of-touch research professors.

Second, it depends on how well the letter writer knows your strengths. If the person doesn't know you well, then they can do little more than write a brief superficial letter. So the second rule of thumb is to ask for letters from people who have detailed familiarity with your strengths. This inevitably leads to the question: "Which is better, a more in-depth letter from a lower status writer, or a less in-depth letter from a high status writer?" Here again, there are no easy answers. If you are applying to a Ph.D. program, you should have at least one letter from a Ph.D. professor even if it tends to be a bit superficial. But even here, don't bother with a letter from a professor if it might be negative or vacuous (like the first example above). Let's face it; if you can't find at least one professor to write you at least a moderately in-depth letter for Ph.D. admission, then you're probably not ready to apply for a Ph.D. program. Either scale back your ambitions or take the time needed to work with a professor.

Once you've decided who to ask, how should you go about asking someone to write a letter? This is more important than you might think. Here are some important **Do's and Don'ts** about asking for letters:

- DO discuss it with the person face-to-face. Pay attention to nonverbal cues that may give away any reluctance to writing a letter.
- DO NOT send an email, write a letter, or post a note on the person's door asking for a letter. It is impersonal, tacky, and a sure way to get a superficial or even negative letter.
- DO give the person an easy way to turn down your request. For example, ask, "I was wondering if you have the time and feel like you know me well enough to write a reasonably in-depth letter of recommendation for me?" This question leaves the person at least two graceful outs: "I don't have the time" or "I don't really know you well enough."
- DO NOT push a reluctant letter writer into writing a letter. The only truly negative letter I ever wrote was for a student who expressed the view that as a faculty member I was obligated to write a letter and would not take (a not-subtle) "no" for an answer. I obliged by writing a brief, unvarnished evaluation.
- DO give yourself a graceful way to decline an offer by someone to write a letter. To do this, just start off the conversation by saying that you're "just feeling a number of people out to see who might be willing to write letters. I'm not sure yet how many I will need." You might want to exercise this "out" if you become uneasy about what the person might say, or if you eventfully find more appropriate writers later on.
- DO NOT ask to see the letter of recommendation. It is considered tacky. If the letter-writers want you to see their letter, they will send you a copy. Knowing that a student is going to see a letter gets in the way of writing a good letter. Sometimes in letters I use embarrassingly glowing terms to describe a student, or perhaps even embellish the truth, to make my endorsement stronger. At other times I feel obligated to point out at least one of the students (minor) limitations in order to give the overall letter credibility. In addition, I don't want several former students comparing what I said about them in their respective letters because it could create hard feelings.
- DO express your appreciation to the letter writer. Crafting a good letter of recommendation takes time and skill. Be sure to express you gratitude. Besides, you never know when you'll need to come back for another letter!
- DO NOT ask for letters at the last minute. Give the letter writers at least three weeks, but give them explicit deadlines for when you must get the materials in. You don't want to rush the referee into writing a slap-dash letter.

**Supply Convenient Ammunition**

The easier you make the task for the letter writer, the better the letter is likely to be. **The single best thing you can do to get a good letter of recommendation**—particularly if a teacher does not have a long acquaintance with you—is to **provide your letter writer with useful information**. Below is a list of the type of information to include on a "brag sheet" to give to your referees if you are applying to a doctoral program. If you are applying to a masters program or for bachelor-level jobs, then research-related items are less important.

- description of your professional goals (or copy of your personal statement)
- description of the types of graduate programs you are applying, including admission standards
- your overall GPA (a non-official transcript would be great)
- a list of psychology courses you have taken, and grades earned
- your minor if you have one
- your GRE, MAT, MCAT or SAT scores

- brief description of research experiences with different faculty members
- the titles and abstracts of any research papers or presentations you have written
- honor societies to which you belong and awards that you have won, scholarships
- organizations you have participated in (and any offices held)
- volunteer experiences relevant to professional goals
- internship experiences relevant to professional goals
- relevant work experience (or include current resume)
- any "life circumstances" information that help explain away lowish GPA's or GRE scores

With this information, you can help your referees make their best possible case for you, to help you attain employment or admission to graduate school. Keep the descriptions very brief. If possible, phrase them in ways that would make it easy for the referee to "crib" into the letter.

Finally, make the referees clerical task as painless as possible. Provide the following.

- Provide all the forms from the schools (together at the same time, if possible), with typed, addressed and **stamped** #10 business-sized envelopes. Don't forget to fill in your name on the forms and sign the waiver statement (yes or no).
- Provide a table with the name of each school and the deadline date for each letter. Clearly state whether the letter is supposed to be sent directly to the graduate program, or whether it is to be sent back to you (within a sealed, signed envelop) that you will forward to the graduate school.
- List all your relevant contact information including name, mailing address, email, phone, fax and so on.

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Letters for Recommendation for Graduate School

**By Lloyd, M. A. & Dewey, R. A. (1997, July 16). How to get good letters of recommendation. [Online]. Available: http://www/psywww.com/careers/lettrec.htm**.

Most of the materials you submit for the evaluation of your application to a graduate program are objective and quantitative: grade-point average, Graduate Record Exam scores, class standing, and so forth. Letters of recommendation are the important exception; they should mention all your positive qualities not revealed by objective data such as GRE scores. A substantive letter from an informed referee can often be very persuasive to graduate admissions committees, especially in "borderline" admissions decisions.

Letters of recommendation may touch on the following points of potential interest to graduate admissions committees:

- How good are your research skills (of great interest to most graduate programs)?
- Do you offer thoughtful contributions to class discussions?
- Do you have good interpersonal skills that enable you to get along with faculty and other students?
- Do you exhibit strong leadership skills?
- Have you contributed to the various extracurricular activities of the Department such as Psi Chi and the Psychology Club?

By mentioning subjects like these, letters of recommendation can provide the “big picture” of your overall promise and potential, something not necessarily revealed by test scores, but every bit as important for predicting success in a graduate program. Admissions committees know this, and they read letters carefully.

Letters of recommendation play an especially important role if there is some anomalous or seemingly contradictory aspect of your application. For example, consider a student whose financial or family problems had an adverse impact on academic performance during a particular year. A letter- writer can offer an explanation that prevents this from being held against the student.

Most schools ask you to provide three letters of recommendation. Naturally, you should get letters from faculty who know you best. A bland or neutral letter, from somebody who knows you only as a name on a class roll, can hurt more than it helps.

Good prospects for good letters are your advisor and those faculty teaching the smaller, intensive courses required of all majors such as Statistics and Research Methods (your grades in which graduate schools review especially carefully).

Other helpful letters could be provided by faculty with whom you have done Directed Research, those from whom you have taken several courses, or faculty with whom you have an affinity and who know you well. Ideally, your referees (letter-writers) are your advocates for admission. However, their advocacy can be only as effective as their knowledge about you.