



How to Get the Best Letters of Recommendation for Grad School

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Applying for graduate school can be tedious and nerve-wracking, and perhaps the worst step is getting good recommendation letters. But the process can be survived, and I can tell you how.

Unfortunately you can't write your own recommendation letters (wouldn't be ethical), but if you get started early during your senior year of college and stay focused and organized, you will find that you can substantially influence what goes into the letters your references write, and the ultimate strength of those letters.

During my 40 years as a university professor, I wrote more than 1,000 recommendation letters, so perhaps I can offer some tips to help you get the best recommendation letters possible for graduate school applications.

WHY do you need strong recommendation letters?

At many institutions, recommendation letters--usually three are required - are just as important in graduate school admissions process as your undergraduate GPA and your scores on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE).

The letters provide the admissions committee with proof of some of the things you will declare on your resume and in your "Statement of Purpose" essay required by most schools. If you've cultivated relationships with professors at your school, their subjective appraisal of your skills and traits will go a long way toward helping you get admitted to graduate school.

Often selection committees will use the numeric figures (GPA, GRE) to make initial cuts in the applicant pool, and then, during the most intense phase of the competition (and it is intense), the committee will look to your recommendation letters for convincing endorsements. Most programs also have a form that your references must fill out, answering short questions about your potential for successful grad school coursework, and then the recommenders are asked to rank you in comparison to other students they have taught over the years. Don't worry, this isn't as bad as it sounds.

Just so you know, graduate schools look for:

- Intellectual development through college
- Aptitude for independent thinking and research
- Analytical abilities and writing skills
- Leadership or creative qualities

Your references need to support their comments with anecdotes or specific examples of your performance as an undergraduate. That kind of specificity of detail makes for good, convincing writing. If the professor can offer only generic bromides such as "she was a fine student, never missed class and was always punctual and attentive," then admissions committee members will recognize that this professor doesn't know the student very well.

WHEN should you ask for recommendation letters?

You will find that many graduate schools set an application deadline in November or December. These are hectic months for professors. The semester is driving toward an end, the holidays loom ahead and term papers and final exams are streaming in, waiting to be graded (and you thought only the poor students suffer end-of-semester stresses). So, anticipate these pressures and ask for letters early - in **September**.

Leave the writers at least three weeks to prepare the letters. Two weeks might force the writers to do a shoddy rush job, and four weeks might tempt them to doze off and forget where they put your application forms. Three weeks seems about right. It always strained my patience when a student sprinted into my office, splashed a half dozen application forms across my desk and asked, "Professor, could you please do these grad school reference letters for me by, maybe, uh, like, next Monday."

I always stifled my impulse to reply, "Yes, maybe, uh, like I will do that just as soon as I finish sticking your skinny neck under a guillotine!" But I knew the letters were important, so I always agreed to do my best to help students meet deadlines, figuring that was part of why the university paid me.

Because professors tend to be preoccupied with their own academic work, it's a good idea for you to **remind them, gently, about one week before your application deadline**, that you need them to finish your letter. Remind them again, as the deadline closes in. Most professors will respond to that prodding in a friendly fashion. They know their letter is essential, and they once went through the same anxiety-producing process of tracking down letters and preparing portfolios and so on. Be assertive in a friendly way, until you know their letter is in the mail.

The key to the whole process of getting the best recommendation letters for your graduate school application is for you to get started early; carefully organize your materials so that you can orchestrate what each letter-writer discusses; and be sure to place into their hands enough specific information that their task will be made easier and their letter will be far more effective once it reaches the hands of grad school officials.

WHO can write the best recommendation letters for you?

You do not necessarily want to seek out your department's most prestigious professors to write you letters. Instead, find those who can comment specifically on who you are as a person and student. Schools won't recognize a professor's name, but they will recognize his or her passion for your future.

It helps if the professor has taught graduate classes, and can compare your potential to the abilities of his or her own previous grad students. Often the instructor who knows you best is a grad student who has taught you in a course, but you are better off finding veteran professors who have experience writing recommendation letters. If you have completed an internship - especially one related to the graduate field you wish to pursue - then ask for a letter from the person who supervised that internship (an editor, an office manager, a research scientist you assisted, etc.). While not necessary, it would help if that person has a graduate degree and thus understands what grad school requires of students. You would be wise to include only one reference who is not a professor.

Give careful thought to the individuals you choose to write your recommendation letters. They could determine your future.

Most professors will not take the responsibility of writing a letter for you if they anticipate giving you a negative appraisal. But don't let a "no" depress you. That person may be fighting a deadline for a book; she may be caring for sick family members; she may have a crumbling marriage; she may be overwhelmed with committee work; she may feel that she doesn't know you or your work well enough to write a good letter; or she may believe that you really should be applying for a job flipping burgers at the Dairy King. Don't spend five seconds worrying about this situation. You are better off finding a reference who is sanguine about your future in grad school. Move on to your next choice.

HOW should you ask for a recommendation letter?

E-mail your professors and request a meeting to discuss your grad school plans. Ask in a tactful but direct way, "Professor, would you be able to write a strong recommendation letter when I apply to grad school?" Try to determine from their response if they will give you lukewarm or enthusiastic support.

WHAT do your letter-writers need from you?

Here's where you can seriously influence the contents and effectiveness of the recommendation letters.

First of all, **try to arrange it so that the letters complement rather than merely echo one another.** This can be achieved in part through selecting which particular items you give each reference before they begin writing, and helps tell more of a complete story about you.

Have one professor write about the quality of your research and term papers, and perhaps have him mention any study abroad experiences; have another address your oral communication skills, leadership abilities, moral character and personality; have a former internship supervisor talk about your work habits, the nature of your internship, your motivation, and what you contributed to the company or organization where you interned. If you worked to help finance your way through college, this last individual could mention that. You might simply make a bulleted list of the specific things you'd like a particular letter-writer to address, and add a request: "If you can, please discuss these topics in your letter."

Make sure your references fully understand your career goals. Talk to them about this, and give them a copy of your "Statement of Purpose," where you further elaborate on your professional objectives. Try to "aim" your letter-writers specifically toward the kind of graduate program you're seeking. If you are applying for grad study in biology, for example, you will want one of your writers to lay special emphasis on your experience as a lab researcher. If you are seeking a grad degree in psychology, you might want extra space to be devoted in a letter to describing your interpersonal abilities.

And then provide information and samples of your work that will help your references illustrate what they will be writing about you. You are, in effect, helping to create your own profile, offering a more balanced portrait of who you are.

Trust me, the professors will welcome your help (writing good recommendation letters takes time, and can be a challenge even for skilled writers). The more prepared my students were, when they requested a letter, the easier my task was, and the more effective my letter was.

Let's say you want me to write a recommendation for you. Here is a helpful list of things you can prepare for me and your other references:

- A copy of your resume and perhaps of your transcript (the latter doesn't have to be official, it can just be a photocopy).
- A cover sheet highlighting salient details of your academic life - Which of my courses did you take, and when? What grades did you receive in each class? What is your overall GPA? What is your GPA in your major field? Did you take a minor, and if so, how will it enhance your graduate studies? This cover sheet could also contain that list of things you want me to be sure to address, in the letter.

- A term paper or long examination that I have graded (I cannot recall something I wrote on your paper two years ago, so jog my memory), or a story you wrote for the student newspaper, or a report you wrote after a semester's research in a laboratory.
- A copy of your personal "Statement of Purpose" essay that you will submit with your application. (I may wind up critiquing your essay, and helping you make your statement more compelling. This essay also should help me further understand why you have decided to go to graduate school, and in what field, and in preparation for which career.)
- A well-organized series of files, one for each graduate school where you will be applying. Each school will ask that I fill out a form, evaluating your potential for success in grad school. Before you give the form to me, fill out the portion that pertains to you (usually at the top of page one). Be certain that you write on the outside of each file which school is involved, where I am to send my letter (cite individual names, titles, if you can), and what my deadline is. Professors can be world-class procrastinators, they can be as fuzzy as a cotton boll, and they often stay so immersed in their research and lectures that they cannot tell you what day it is. Help them - stress the deadline. If I am mailing the letter, give me a stamped, addressed envelope. If you are going to pick up my letter and mail it with your packet, I will seal it and write my name across the seal (grad schools require that). More and more schools are requesting online recommendations. Be sure I know which of your potential schools do that, and give me the proper URL, so I can find your electronic file and post my letter. For each file dedicated to one of the schools where you're applying, make it clear to me how that grad program differs from the others. Computers make it easy for professors to tailor their recommendation letters to fit the specific graduate program the student is pursuing.
- Make certain I have your telephone number and e-mail address, in case I need further information.
- Include a stamped self-addressed postcard bearing this message--"Please mail this card to me when you receive this letter" and I will drop that card into the envelope with your letter. That way, you can track the letter, and you need to do that until you know that all your letters have landed in the right hands.

WHERE should copies of your recommendation letters be stored, for later use?

Once your references have finished your letter, you might ask that they send a copy to your campus "Career Services Center," where you can establish a confidential credentials file. It can contain all your recommendation letters, a copy of your transcript and resume and other materials. Career Services (under whatever name, on your campus) will send out copies of your letters whenever you need them.

You might also explore setting up a credentials file through a Web-based file management service called "Interfolio.com." Once your credentials go online (including your recommendation letters, resume, writing samples, your "Statement of Purpose," whatever you need there), anyone whom you authorize can go and view your materials. Once you register with Interfolio, your reference letters can be sent there electronically, by professors and others, and often this saves

them a lot of trouble. Interfolio offers an affordable way of sending your materials out to grad schools, and Interfolio will send out your portfolio either by UPS or electronically to whatever destinations you identify. The site assures confidentiality, and even you cannot access a recommendation letter if a professor has asked that it be kept confidential.

Most recommendation forms will ask you to sign a voluntary waiver that means you are surrendering your right to view the recommendations written on your behalf. Many professors feel uncomfortable writing an open letter, and some even balk at doing so, if you don't waive your rights to view the letters. Some grad school selection committees may weigh lightly any non-restricted letters in your application. So, waive your rights to read the letters. You can generally trust that letters produced by those who have agreed to help you will be positive (and, again, you can help see to that, by giving your references plenty of help once they agree to write a letter).

So, now what?

Well, now you owe a debt to each person who wrote a letter recommending you. **Send each a Thank You note** ("I know how busy you are, and that your time is valuable, so I really appreciate your help..." etc.). This is a thoughtful gesture. This is also smart politics. You may need another such letter or assistance from the same references later. Speaking from 40 years of experience, I can tell you writing recommendation letters never got easier for me. More often than not, I spent two hours marshalling my thoughts and all the details into a persuasive letter. Like most professors, I wanted my students to succeed. Nothing made me happier than to have a student drop by to tell me that he or she got accepted at a good graduate school.