

HOW TO GET GOOD LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Getting good letters of recommendation is a critical step for a successful entry to an ideal graduate school. Most graduate schools require a minimum of three letters of recommendation. Many students do not have any clues about how to get a good letter of recommendation, such as matters of when to start making good impressions or finding the right candidates to ask for a reference. The easiest way to get started is to consult with a school academic advisor. They usually suggest that their students take several classes of independent studies as electives to gain research and clinical experience while fulfilling the requirements for graduation at the same time.

Many students also try desperately to get the three letters of recommendation by joining multiple research labs at the same time. Dr. Kim Barchard, Associate Professor at UNLV, says she does not recommend that strategy. Her reasons are as follows: 1) in most of the cases when students work in multiple research labs, they do not devote enough time to each lab to meet their requirements; 2) the little time dedicated to each lab does not help the students to learn new skills or gain experience in the field; 3) the students would most likely end up accomplishing fewer tasks or are less involved in each lab than they would have been doing only one lab at a time; 4) as a result, students can end up being overworked by joining multiple labs simultaneously, which is harmful for their well-beings; 5) when it comes down to getting their letters of recommendation, professors will not have much to mention about these students if they have not contributed much in their lab. Therefore, their letter of recommendation for you will most likely turn out to be weak.

Dr. Barchard does suggest an alternative to getting other letters of recommendation by participating actively in regular classes rather than joining multiple research labs. Here are several tips on "how": 1) ask class related and intelligent questions before, during, and after each class; 2) consult with your professor about applying to a graduate school and any topic related to your major as to show your enthusiasm in the field; 3) make positive impressions and try to have the professor get to know more about your personal interests and any special skills that would make you a great candidate for graduate school.

Warm up exercise: each student should discuss with peers about their potential professors for letters of recommendation.

The next couple of articles are some great sources on how to get started:

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Source: <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 those advisors and faculty that teach the smaller, more 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.

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. Here is the type of information letter writers often find helpful:

- your overall GPA
- a list of psychology courses you have taken, and grades earned
- your minor if you have one
- the titles and abstracts of any research papers you have written
- honor societies to which you belong
- awards that you have won
- activities in which you have participated (and any offices held)
- work experience
- service activities such as volunteer work
- a description of your professional goals

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.

TIPS ON GETTING A GOOD LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

Source: <http://www.unr.edu/psych/advising/howto.html>

According to Kirsten Rewey at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, there are four great tips that should help students to get a *good* letter of recommendation; furthermore, she is providing some additional hints. Therefore she writes:

Face-to-Face Request

It is very important to make your request for a letter of recommendation face-to-face. First, a face-to-face request gives you the opportunity to make sure the faculty member has time to write a letter of recommendation and that the letter will be good. Keep in mind there are a number of reasons why a professor might not be able to write a good letter of recommendation for you, so don't take a "no" response personally. For example, I turned down one student because she had only been a student in one of my classes: I didn't feel that I knew her well enough to write a good letter. In addition, although a professor could probably put together a letter, consider that faint praise can be damaging. If the only thing a professor knows about a student is that they attended class regularly and passed all of the exams, will the letter of recommendation really be helpful, or will the letter end up hurting their chances for admission?

Second, a face-to-face request gives the faculty member an opportunity to ask clarifying questions. Asking clarifying questions is especially helpful for the more complicated application procedures. For example, which letters are mailed directly to the graduate school and which letters are returned to the student? Which envelopes must have the professor's signature on the seal? Students applying to law and medical schools have a particularly complicated application process, so a face-to-face request can circumvent missing or late letters of recommendation.

Time

Time is a precious commodity in our society, especially among faculty who have to write letters of recommendation for several different students within a relatively short time frame. In order to give professors ample time to write and revise a letter of recommendation, you should make your first request about 4 weeks before the letter should be mailed to the graduate program or returned to you. Four weeks may seem like a long time, but faculty have to juggle letter writing in among their other responsibilities. In addition, the 4 weeks gives faculty time to revise and polish the letter before it is mailed.

The time needed for subsequent letters of recommendation will vary for each faculty member. For example, I need about 1-2 weeks to write additional letters. I have a rapid turnaround for subsequent letters because I make a file for each student who requests a letter of recommendation from me. When I receive subsequent requests, I sit down with the original letter of recommendation and a copy of the program requirements and I then make modifications to the original letter so the new letter more closely fits the requirements of the

new program. Consult individual faculty members to ensure that they will have enough time to write additional letters of recommendation.

Information

As faculty sit down to write a letter of recommendation they often find they cannot remember important information about a student. To solve the problem the psychology faculty at Saint Vincent College have constructed an information packet which students must complete before they can obtain a letter of recommendation. (The packet is summarized in [Table 1](#).) As you can see in [Table 1](#), we request information about a student's academic, extracurricular, and personal experiences as well as their personal characteristics. The information we obtain from the form allows us to write well-thought-out letters of recommendation.

Your psychology department may not have a form like the one used at Saint Vincent College, but you can easily provide detailed information to faculty writing letters of recommendation for you. Start by listing the characteristics for which the graduate school wants information. Then under each characteristic describe how you meet that characteristic.

For example, perhaps Acme University wants information on your moral character, motivation to complete graduate school, and academic ability. You could create an information sheet like the one shown in [Figure 1](#). In the information sheet you would list the important characteristics and how you demonstrate each. Furthermore, because there is substantial overlap between desired characteristics for graduate programs, you may only need to create one information sheet for all the programs you are applying to.

Be Concrete

Increasingly, graduate admission committees are insisting on evidence to support claims made in letters of recommendation. It's no longer sufficient to say, "Susie is motivated." Faculty need to provide evidence that Susie is, in fact, motivated.

Providing evidence can be troublesome. Faculty don't keep copies of student papers, quizzes, or descriptions of student's participation in the classroom. To aid faculty you can create a portfolio of your academic work which faculty can then refer to as they write your letter of recommendation. Portfolios are particularly helpful because faculty can see, through your papers and exams, how you've improved over your undergraduate career.

An alternative to a portfolio is to keep an electronic record of your activities during your undergraduate career. For example, I have to review my performance annually as part of the tenure process. I know my memory is often faulty, so I keep an electronic file on my desktop that lists what activity I performed and when the activity occurred. You could create a similar document and give it to faculty as an aid for writing the letter of recommendation.

Organization

One obvious tip is to organize the forms, envelopes, program descriptions, and other materials you will forward to faculty members. One simple organization technique is to paper-clip the form, program description, and envelope together. Then, to keep all of your materials together, place them in a folder or large envelope. Remember that you will have to create a folder or envelope for each faculty member who is writing letters of recommendation for you.

An additional organizational tip is to type a list of the schools you are applying to in

chronological order with the most immediate deadlines first. (See [Figure 1](#) for an example.) The chronological list makes it easy for faculty members to complete letters of recommendation on time.

Additional Hints

One strategy you might consider is to ask individual faculty to comment on specific skills or abilities in the letter of recommendation. In other words, rather than have three faculty members try to address all of your characteristics in the letter of recommendation, ask each faculty member to focus on one or two characteristics. For example, you might ask Professor Adams to describe your academic ability and motivation and ask Professor Brown to describe your written and oral communication skills. If you choose to use this tip, make sure that the combination of all the letters covers all the characteristics mentioned by the individual graduate program.

You should also provide faculty with a mailing address, including the name of an individual or committee, for each graduate program. Without a mailing address any letter of recommendation appears unprofessional (see [Figure 1](#)).

You can also utilize other resources to aid the entire application process. Some resources are listed at the end of this article and can be obtained from the American Psychological Association, the American Psychological Society, the Psi Chi National Office, and local or Internet bookstores. If your college or university has a graduate program, you can also talk to graduate students as a source of information.

In conclusion, with some advanced planning you can help faculty write a *good* letter of recommendation for you. Remember to make a face-to-face request, give faculty ample time to write the letter, give the faculty lots of concrete information, and be organized. (http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article_75.asp)

Figure 1

Saint Vincent College Psychology Department

Letter of Recommendation Request

Category	Information
Instructions and checklist	Discuss the letter of recommendation with each faculty member face-to-face. Attach a copy of your unofficial transcript.
Demographic information	Name, campus and permanent address, phone numbers
Academic information	Major, minor, GPAs, completion of certificate programs, supporting course work, standardized test scores, academic

	awards, honor society membership
Experiences	Describe internship(s), independent research, work experiences, extracurricular activities (such as participation in activities in Psy Chi, Psych Club).
Personal experiences	Describe academic strengths, academic weaknesses (and how have tried to remedy them), why you are qualified for graduate school.
Personal characteristics	Provide concrete examples of your dependability, intelligence, initiative, written communication skills, oral communication skills, interpersonal skills.

The article below emphasizes the importance of finding the right people for letters of recommendation.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Source: http://gsi.berkeley.edu/resources/rec_letter/sample_letter.html

Letters of recommendation are extremely important. They can help you and they can hurt you. The most helpful letters come from teachers who have had considerable contact with you, especially in non-classroom settings such as research labs. A letter from a teacher who says he or she can't remember who you are exactly but you got an A so you must be quite bright is not helpful. After all, information about course work per se is available on your transcript -- the letter adds nothing and may in fact subtract something; it suggests that you haven't had sufficient contact with your teachers to have secured a more informative recommendation. What does this mean to the committee? Maybe it means that you are an extremely timid person, the kind who disappears into the background, does well on tests but says nothing in class, for example.

The best kind of letter is from someone who has been involved with you professionally--who has supervised research on your part, who has co-adhered a paper with you, who has served as an adviser to you in your role as an officer in Psi Chi, and so on. However, if you want to have a really fine letter of recommendation, you have to have done some really fine things, such as conducting quality research or making presentations to professional meetings. You

have to have been involved in the discipline of psychology if you expect to get a really good letter of recommendation.

A letter from an employer can be useful if the job was in the field of psychology, and the letter comments on your accomplishments of specific duties, your aptitude for this type of work and so on. Otherwise, such letters are usually not helpful. Also, don't include letters from public officials or professionals with whom your contacts have not been of a professional sort. What the mayor has to say about you is of no interest to admissions committees. It may even do you a disservice. It suggests that you believe that you ought to be looked upon more favorably because you have some contact with important public officials. This will probably be offensive to most academics. Likewise, don't get your priest or rabbi or minister, your family doctor or other individuals of that kind to write a letter on your behalf. Last but not least, don't ask your personal therapist to send a letter.

It is a good idea to include a carefully assembled vita even if some of the material is redundant with the application itself. A vita is something you should begin now, if you haven't already done so.

The following information shows the qualities of a student that professors consider when writing a letter of recommendation. It comes from career center of Berkeley University of California at: <http://career.berkeley.edu/Letter/LetterGuidelines.stm#academic>

WHEN APPLYING TO MULTIPLE SCHOOLS

Chances are, if you're planning on going to graduate school, you are applying to *multiple* graduate programs. This means asking for multiple letters of recommendation from the same professor. According to Dr. Kim Barchard at UNLV, it is not uncommon for a student to ask for 10 to 15 letters of recommendation from one person, but there are very important things to remember.

First, know what each of your schools is asking for. Different Graduate Programs sometimes want different topics to be covered in your letters of recommendation. Also, some programs require forms for the referee to fill out while others do not. Additional requirements might be whether the referee sends the letter directly to the school or gives the letter back to you in a sealed envelope with their signature across the sealed flap. You need to know these details before asking for a letter.

Second, collaborate and organize all your information before asking for your letter of recommendation. Have everything (see figure 1) ready and organized in one big manila envelope. Remember, you are still being evaluated by your person of reference. If you are disorganized with your letter of recommendation content, they will take this into consideration when writing your letter. Make a good impression!

Finally, do as much as you can for your referee. Most of the time, if there is a form involved, they must hand write their name, address, etc. on the form; fill this out for them. Additionally, provide a stamped University envelope with all the addresses filled out. Make this as painless as you can for them and they will be more inclined to give you a good letter of recommendation. As mentioned before, give them time as well. Most professors request 1

month in advance and some professors (Dr. Barchard) requires as much as 2 months in advance. Make sure you know the preference of your writer. 2 weeks is NOT enough!

Sample Letter of Recommendation

[University Letter Head]

[Sender's Name]
[Sender's Address, Line 1]
[Sender's Address, Line 2]
[Sender's Phone Number]
[Sender's Fax Number]
[Sender's E-mail Address]

[Today's Date]

[Recipient's Name]
[Recipient's Address, Line 1]
[Recipient's Address, Line 2]

Dear [Recipient's Name] or To Whom it May Concern,

It is my pleasure to recommend Jane Doe for admission to [name of program] at [name of university]. I am a fifth year Ph.D. student at the University of California, Berkeley. I came to know Jane when I was her Graduate Student Instructor for Philosophy 111: Ethical Relativism, taught by Professor John Doe. The course comprised [short description of course]. Jane distinguished herself by submitting an exceptionally well researched and interesting project on ethical practices in ancient Greece. I would rank her in the top 2% of students that I have taught in the past five years in respect of her writing ability and research skills.

Overall, Jane is highly intelligent and has good analytical skills. Her project on ethical practices in ancient Greece demonstrated her ability to come a detailed understanding of the ethical practices of another, very different culture, and to analyze the consequences of those practices for contemporary ethical theories. She gave a particularly interesting discussion of the difficult practice of infanticide, and showed both sensitivity and detachment when discussing its ethical consequences. Her overall intelligence is also reflected in her grades for the course, which were by far the best in the class.

Jane has excellent communication skills. Her written work is both clear and concise, and interesting to read. She demonstrated her oral articulateness in the discussion sections that were an integral part of the course. Each discussion section focused on a particular ethical dilemma. Students were required analyze morally problematic situations, and to develop and argue for their own ethical views with regard to the issue in question. Jane was highly proficient in applying the course material in analyzing the problem situations. She always explained her views very concisely and gave supporting arguments that were both clear and persuasive. Jane also demonstrated good team working skills in group assignments.

At a personal level, Jane is a well disciplined, industrious student with a pleasant personality. She went well beyond the course requirements in the quantity and quality of her project,

putting in a lot of extra research and attending office hours every week. Throughout the course, Jane demonstrated great perseverance and initiative. She was not only interested in and motivated to learn the material, but put great work into assimilating it to her own experience and developing her own ideas about each ethical topic that we discussed.

Jane is unquestionably an exceptional candidate for graduate study in Ethics. Jane's work in Philosophy 111 suggests that she would greatly benefit from the opportunities for intellectual development provided by a sustained period of graduate study. She has proven herself to have the perseverance and initiative, and the intellectual creativity necessary to complete an advanced graduate degree. I would therefore highly recommend Jane Doe. If her performance in my class is a good indication of how she would perform as a graduate student, she would be an extremely positive asset to your program.

If I can be of any further assistance, or provide you with any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Sincerely,

[Signature]

[Sender's Name and Title]

Additional sources:

"The Complete Guide to Graduate School Admission" -- available at UNLV Lied library.

<http://businessmajors.about.com/od/samplerrecommendations/>

<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Flats/5353/classes/7sins.html> -- what not to do.