



Letters of Recommendation Information

While employers will want a list of references from job applicants, nearly every graduate program requires applicants to submit multiple letters of recommendation. Do not underestimate the importance of these letters, as they are an essential evaluative piece of your application, along with personal statements and transcripts. Letter writers generally provide a narrative description of your personal qualities, accomplishments, and experiences that make you unique and well-suited for the programs to which you have applied. In addition, programs often ask for a quantitative evaluation based on several categories. For example, schools ask letter writers to rate you on: likelihood of completing the program, intellectual ability, maturity, leadership potential, motivation, integrity, ability to work with others, creativity, time management, and written/oral communication skills. A strong recommendation letter can make up for weaknesses you may have in your application.

Who To Ask

Most graduate programs require two or three recommendation letters. You want to be strategic about who you ask to write your letters. Aim for a set of recommendation letters that cover your range of skills, as no one letter will provide everything. Ideally, letters should collectively cover your academic and scholastic skills, research abilities and experiences, and applied experiences (e.g., internships or related work experience).

Ask the person who can write you the best letter, not the person who is easiest to ask. That is, letter writers who are only able to relate information already contained in your curriculum vita (e.g., grades, names of awards) are not good letter writers. A good letter of recommendation provides information about you that other sources cannot. Overall, the recommender should know you long enough (over several courses) and your work well enough to write with authority. The recommender should also have a high opinion of you and be able to favorably compare you with your peers. Consider asking faculty members, internship supervisors, and employers.

Faculty

Faculty letters can provide insight into your academic aptitude as well as personality traits that may contribute to your potential for graduate school success. Most graduate programs will be looking for several of your letters to be from former professors. Faculty who know you on a more personal level write the best letters. Seek out professors who you have taken multiple classes from or have completed substantial projects for (e.g., thesis professor or research supervisor). Needless to say, you should have done very well in these classes or on these projects. You may also consider professors who know you outside of the classroom through activities or student groups. An advisor who also knows you in at least one other context (courses, extracurricular, research assistant, etc.) would also be a good choice.

Internship Supervisors and Employers

You may also request a letter from an internship supervisor or employer. Letters from these sources are especially useful if you are working in a field that relates to your planned field of study. However, even a letter from an employer in an unrelated field can be useful to your application if he or she discusses competencies and skills (e.g., work ethic, independence, problem solving, and leadership) that will contribute to your graduate school success. Just be sure your supervisor is aware of how to focus the letter to your educational goals.

Approaching Recommenders

Ask for your letters in person when you and the potential letter writer have time to talk about your aspirations. You will want to discuss your educational and career goals with your recommender. Ask if your recommender can provide a letter that is personal and highly positive. If you sense reluctance from the recommender, thank him/her and ask someone else. Remember that it is best to ask early in the semester and at least 4 weeks prior to the application deadline. Waiting until the last minute to ask does not make a positive impression. Some graduate programs have you identify your recommenders as part of your application. Do not list a recommender in your application before confirming personally that the person is able to write for you.

Providing Information

The best thing that you can do to ensure that your recommendation letters cover all the bases is to provide your recommenders with all the necessary information. Do not assume that they will remember every detail about you. Faculty members often have 100 or more students each semester. Provide a file with all of your background information. You should provide this information when you request your letter or at least 4 weeks before the application deadline. The Department of Psychology has a checklist that will help you get your recommenders the necessary information (see our website).

Confidentiality

Most recommendation forms supplied by graduate programs require you to decide whether to waive or retain your rights to see your recommendation letters. Confidential recommendation letters, in which you waive your right to see it, tend to carry more weight. Admissions committees feel the letter writers are more honest in their assessment when applicants waive their rights. Keep in mind that some faculty may not write a recommendation letter unless it is confidential.

Follow-up

As the application deadline approaches, you should gently remind your recommenders of the deadline. You should also contact the graduate programs to inquire about the completeness of your application. Be sure to send a thank you note once you have determined that recommenders have submitted their letters. Regardless of the outcome of your application, it is a professional courtesy to keep in contact with your recommenders. They are invested in your future and would certainly like to know your plans after graduation.