

Letters of Recommendation for Graduate School

Student Guide

Typically, graduate schools require that you submit two to three letters of recommendation with your application. Although grade point averages and Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores play a central role in graduate admissions decisions, most graduate programs do not base their decisions on numeric scores alone. Letters of recommendation provide graduate schools with a more subjective view of your abilities. If you have the right people saying the right things about you, your chances for admission are increased. Strong letters of recommendation can often enhance an otherwise average application.

Each institution may have its own unique requirements - for example, one institution may want two letters from faculty only, while another might request 3 letters from faculty or work supervisors. Many schools do not specify who they want to write the letters. Follow each school's instructions or preferences, but when in doubt it is a good idea to have at least 2 letters written by faculty members. Also, it is usually best to have a strong letter from someone who knows your capabilities well, rather than someone with an impressive title who doesn't really know you. Graduate admissions committees are trying to predict how successful you will be in their academic programs, so academic references are most important.

As you prepare your application, note that some schools ask that you collect the letters and submit them with your application, while others ask that the letter writer send them directly to the school. Be sure to check your application instructions when requesting letters be prepared on your behalf.

Whom should you ask to write your letters?

To obtain the best possible letters of recommendation, get to know faculty in a way that will make them believe you are a good candidate for graduate school: You need professors who know you well and think highly of you. Avoid asking a professor who doesn't know you very well (even if you got a good grade in his/her course). This puts the professor in an awkward position and you are likely to receive a short, noncommittal letter. This can actually hinder your chances more than help. But, it is best if you get to know three members of the faculty reasonably well. Don't restrict your contact to only one faculty member by, for example, doing research with the same person who is your advisor and also taking only your advisor's senior seminar classes.

Try to choose faculty who know you in a context that is appropriate to the program to which you are applying. For instance, if you are applying for an advanced degree in English Literature, make sure at least one of your references comes from a faculty member in that discipline. It is fine to request letters from faculty outside your academic area, but make sure the letters reflect skills (e.g., writing, research, debate, etc.) that you will need in graduate school.

Avoid using references, however glowing they might be, from coaches, internship coordinators and/or previous employers. An exception: if there was an academic component to your experience and one of these individuals oversaw your work.

Most importantly, ask only people who are willing to say good things about you! If you're not sure, ASK. Be straightforward: "Do you feel that you know me well enough to say positive things

about my academic potential?" A less-than-positive recommendation can kill your chances of being accepted.

When should you ask for the letters?

Faculty members are very busy people, so be sure to ask at least ONE MONTH in advance for any letters you might need. Ask even earlier, if possible. If you are not yet a senior, focus on developing closer relationships with faculty, so you can be sure to get stronger letters in the future.

You may wish to use your confidential credentials file with the Career Center to consolidate the process of providing each school with letters of recommendation from your professors. This service is especially convenient for those applying to several schools with letters from multiple recommenders. Many graduate schools will provide you with ratings checklists and other forms for your recommenders to complete; be sure to verify whether these forms are required, or if a letter of recommendation already written (i.e., the ones in your credentials file) are sufficient. This service is available to students and alumni free of charge.

What should you provide for your recommenders?

Faculty members can write stronger letters for you if they have a clear sense of what your goals are for graduate study. Be prepared to share a copy of your application essays (even in draft form), a resume, and/or sample of academic work -- these will all help professors with concrete examples and information to potentially incorporate into their letters. ASK THEM what they need, then be sure to supply that well in advance of any deadlines.

Give your writers a well-organized, thorough packet of materials with the following items:

1. An unofficial copy of your current academic transcript showing the courses you've taken and the level at which you've performed. .
2. A copy of your résumé, which can be longer than one page and include things like research you've conducted, papers that you've published or presented, internships you've completed, etc.
3. A pre-addressed, stamped envelope for each letter that goes directly to a grad school. If there are graduate school letters that should be returned to you in a sealed envelope, be sure to write your name and the school's name on the outside of each envelope. Remember that you can use the letter of recommendation service in the Career Center.
4. Any forms that are to be submitted with the letter. If there is a form that goes with the letter, complete as much information as possible. Type in the recommender's name, the person's title (e.g., Associate Professor), and the person's contact information (e.g., telephone number, fax number, street address). That way, your letter writer can focus strictly on the recommendation itself. If you are asked to indicate whether or not you waive access to the letter of recommendation, be sure to answer affirmatively, that you do waive the right. Answering otherwise gives the appearance of not trusting your letter writer, and it dilutes the effectiveness of the letter.

5. A cover note briefly listing:

- Your contact information in case the letter writer needs to reach you;
- What class(es) you took with this person: Grade received, research done, etc.
- The deadline for each letter you need; how it should be sent;
- Your career aspirations and the type of program you're applying for;
- Information you would like emphasized in the letter;

You may even want to provide your writers with a list of skills or expertise you want them to focus on, or create a personal accomplishments list that they can work from. Your writers will probably appreciate not having to create their recommendations from scratch. Under the appropriate circumstances (say, if you and the writer have been out of touch for a while and they cannot remember much about you), you can offer to write a draft of a recommendation that your writer can work from.

The following list of attributes (compiled by the National Association of Colleges and Employers) is often used by employers as criteria on which to base eventual selection. Many of these can also apply to your potential as a graduate student:

ability to communicate	flexibility
intelligence	interpersonal skills
self-confidence	self-knowledge
willingness to accept responsibility	ability to handle conflict
initiative	goal achievement
leadership	competitiveness
energy level	direction.
imagination	

Another issue is whether letter writers should attempt to address weaknesses in your application. For example, if you received a low Quantitative GRE score due to a family crisis immediately before the test date, your letter writer might mention this and argue that the "A" you received in Statistics is a better measure of your quantitative skill. This strategy can be very helpful in some situations, but it is also a double-edged sword that can draw attention to weaknesses in your application. Discuss the pro's and con's of this approach with your letter writer before adopting such a strategy -- each situation is unique, and there is no single best way to proceed. .

What other resources can help?

There is a [section for faculty](#) in this website that addresses writing letters of recommendation. You may wish to mention this to your letter writers or to share this link. Two good resources for writing your personal statement or statement of intent for grad school are: Graduate Admissions Essays – What Works, What Doesn't, and Why by Donald Asher, and www.essayedge.com. The Asher book is available in the Career Center Library.