

Information for Students Seeking Letters of Recommendation

At some point during your studies, you might find that you need a Letter of Recommendation from a *referee*, or someone who can provide an evaluation of your potential for success in academic and/or professional settings. Students may need to provide Letters of Recommendation for various scholarships, awards, and of course graduate school applications.



right now, i'm
trying to choose
between a mas-
ter's degree, or
enlarging my
earholes

Consequently, in addition to your coursework, GPA, and other academic experience, Letters of Recommendation are a pretty standard tool used in higher education and other professional settings. And as Patricia Keith-Spiegel and Michael Wiederman, authors of the popular resource *The Complete Guide to Graduate School Admission* (2000) suggest, “although you cannot dictate what your referees will say, you most certainly have some influence on the process” (p. 172). Students who need such letters should thoroughly consider the following points:

1. Who should you ask for letters?

It depends. In general, in trying to identify a good reference, you should consider the following factors:

1. Does the faculty member know who you are?
2. Have you done well in any/several of a faculty member's courses?
3. Have you been an advisee of the faculty member for multiple semesters?
4. Have you ever spoken with the faculty member about your career goals?
5. Have you conducted a research project with the faculty member?
6. Have you been actively involved in University- and/or Department-level organizations (e.g., Student Government Association, the B.A.S.S. Club)?

If you can answer yes to a few of these general items, then that particular faculty member might be a good person to ask.

2. Okay...you've answered “yes” to a few of those questions. How do you ask?

After considering the questions above and when approaching potential referees, you should ask if they would be able to write you a **STRONG** letter of recommendation (and not simply “a letter of recommendation”). There is a huge difference, obviously, but it gets into the fact that some faculty members might say “Sure, I'll write a letter for you” and say negative things about you. More likely, however, is that they simply don't know you very well and will end up writing very average things about you in that letter. Have you ever heard the expression “damning with faint praise?” You want to avoid that problem and get the **STRONGEST** possible letters.

Thus, if you clearly ask “Would you be willing and able to write a STRONG letter of recommendation for me” up front, you weed out anyone who might not know you well enough to write a strong letter, as well as those folks who you probably wouldn’t want writing for you in the first place.

3. Should you ask me for a letter of recommendation?

You might wish to ask me to serve as one of your referees. Before asking me, you should first consider the questions in #1 (*Who should you ask for letters?*) and #2 (*How do you ask?*).

*PLEASE NOTE: I may NOT be a good referee if you:

1. Have not had me for a class.
2. Have not performed well in my class(es).
3. Have attended my class(es) but never really made an impression (e.g., you didn’t participate, attend regularly, etc.). It is very difficult for me to write a strong letter if I don’t know you. And remember, you want STRONG letters!
4. Only know me through 1-2 semesters of advising and have never really discussed with me your career goals.

4. Alright...I think I know who to ask and how to go about it. What’s next?

Assuming you meet the criteria in question 1 (*Who should you ask for letters?*) and you believe you have identified referees who would be able to provide you with STRONG Letters of Recommendation (question 2), you should contact them well in advance (3 – 4 weeks is appreciated).

Remember, you want to obtain STRONG letters and this is where YOU can take responsibility for the relative strength of your letters. Yes, it is up to the referees to actually write the letters, but Keith-Spiegel and Wiederman (2000) argue that the “best help a referee can give a student is to provide specific and detailed examples of accomplishments or character traits that will validate the quality of an applicant’s record” (p. 176). Thus, in order to ensure a good letter, you should provide your referees with the following information that will help them help you:

1. A reminder how the faculty member “knows you.” If it’s just from one or two classes, that’s fine. Remind him/her how you did in the class(es). Were you really involved? How would you assess your contribution?
2. The program (school, department, degree you’re seeking, emphasis, if appropriate). This may include a copy of the application.
3. Do they have a “Referee Form?” Some programs have standard forms they want referees to use in addition to (or in place of) a general letter.
4. Your [“Personal Statement”](#) if you have to write one for the program. And if not, provide a summary on why you think you’re a good fit for this particular program. At minimum, you should provide a brief statement of your interests and career goals.
5. A current transcript (unofficial is fine).
6. Your overall GPA.
7. Your “major-specific” GPA.

8. Your “relevant” GPA (if different from #7). This might take a little work, but it’s worth it, as it can balance a not-so-stellar overall GPA. For example, if you’re applying to a Social Work program, calculate your GPA for any and all courses you’ve taken that you consider “relevant.”
9. Your accomplishments. This can include scholarships, awards, things you’ve done at work that you’re particularly proud of, etc.
10. Your involvement in relevant extracurricular activities. Are you a member of any professional organizations?

Other things you should consider including:

1. GRE/standardized test scores.
2. Do you have a Curriculum Vita? If not, you should. It’s nice to include with your application and it’s also good to give to your referees.
3. Any other comments that indicate your interests, educational/professional record, and strengths.

Providing your referee(s) with this information (well in advance) will ensure that he or she can create strong, personalized recommendations that truly speak to your abilities and qualifications. Work hard to organize your materials! Eliminate any ambiguity. Take advantage of the wide availability of computers, printers, etc. For example, you might consider printing address labels. This will minimize the chances that some stressed out faculty member will send your letter to the wrong address!

Once you have organized these materials, you should also remember to include a deadline for mailing the letter(s). This should be an actual date (i.e., when you want it mailed; not when your applications are due).

Remember, when asking for recommendations, your best bet is to make it as easy and organized as possible for those who agree. You want them to “do a good job” and submit strong, personalized letters by the required deadlines.

It might seem like a lot, but if you’ve made it this far, you’ve probably thought of most of this stuff anyway and likely have it pretty handy. If not, well, spend some time creating it.

Other tips:

- Start early!
- Find a friend/classmate to serve as your “grad school buddy” as you navigate the process.
- Graduate school is “all about the fit.” You need to really think about how well a particular program “fits” your interests and helps you achieve your goals. For example, if you want to study children with ADHD but for some reason apply to schools where there are no faculty members doing that type of work, it won’t matter what your application looks like...you are unlikely to be accepted.
- Be strategic and thoughtful when identifying prospective programs/schools. Ask yourself, “Would I *really* go there if offered admission?”
- Seek out feedback! Ask someone else to read your application letters. Discuss your plans with your advisor and/or another faculty member.

Resources:

Keith-Spiegel, P., & Wiederman, M. W. (2000). *The complete guide to graduate school admission: Psychology, counseling, and related profession* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: Mahwah, NJ.

Kracen, A. C., & Wallace, I. J. (2008). *Applying to graduate school in psychology: Advice from successful students and prominent psychologists*. American Psychological Association: Washington, DC.

Kuther, T. L. (2008). *Surviving graduate school in psychology: A pocket mentor*. American Psychological Association: Washington, DC.

Landrum, R. E., & Davis, S. F. (2010). *The psychology major: Career options and strategies for success* (2nd ed.). Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, NJ.

Sternberg, R. J. (2006). *Career paths in psychology: Where your degree can take you* (2nd ed.). American Psychological Association: Washington, DC.

<http://www.apa.org/>

<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/apssc/undergrad/>

<http://www.psychgrad.org/apply.html>