

# Letters of Recommendation

Most graduate schools will ask you to provide three letters of recommendation. You should get letters from at least two faculty members who know you best and can write detailed letters that emphasize your abilities and attributes that make you good graduate school material. Please note that the requirements for letters of recommendation is determined by the graduate program you are applying to and whether it is a research or applied-focused graduate program. A bland or neutral letter from someone who barely knows you from the one class you took with that person can hurt your application more than it helps. A strong letter from someone who knows you well can be very persuasive to graduate admissions committees, especially in “borderline” admissions decisions.

You should get letters of recommendation from people who know about your skills and abilities that are relevant to graduate school. Good prospects for letters of recommendation are (1) faculty who supervised a research project or independent study in which you were involved; (2) faculty who taught you in a smaller, intensive course, such as an “L” class or Research Methods; (3) faculty you had for more than one class (unless the classes were large lecture sections); and (4) internship and/or volunteer site supervisor. It is unwise to ask for letters from a family member, a personal friend, or a supervisor from a job that is unrelated to your area of study or professional goals, or your personal therapist.

The more your letter-writer knows about you, the better the letter will be. You should always provide your letter-writer with useful information about yourself, including:

- Your overall GPA
- A list of psychology classes taken along with grades earned.
- Your minor, if you have one
- Honor societies and academic organizations to which you belong
- Awards that you have won
- Internship, Research, and/or Work experience
- Service activities, such as volunteer work
- A description of your professional goals
- A copy of the personal statement that you will include with your applications

This information will help the letter-writer create a picture of your overall ability and potential for success in graduate school. Letters of recommendation can also play an important role if there is something anomalous in your academic records. For example, as student may have had an illness that had an adverse impact on academic performance during one semester. A letter-writer can offer an explanation that prevents this from being held against you.

## **Tips for asking for Letters of Recommendation:**

1. Ask for letters 8 weeks before the application deadline, and remind letter-writers 2-3 weeks prior to the deadline.
2. Be courteous and polite when requesting letters of recommendation. Remember that you are asking the person to do something extra on top of their usual workload.
3. Ask the person if he or she is able to write a strong letter for you. Admissions committees take letters of recommendation seriously, and a weak letter will hurt your chances of admission. If a professor doesn't know you well enough to advocate for your admission, you should find someone else who can write a good letter on your behalf.
4. Provide all necessary information, forms, addresses, envelopes and postage to complete and submit the letter of recommendation. Minimize any inconvenience to the letter-writer.
5. Waive your right to view the contents of the letter. If you are worried that the person will write something unflattering, then you should not ask that person to write you a letter.
6. After someone agrees to write letters for you, don't nag or ask repeatedly if the letters are done. Near the application deadline, you may contact each graduate school to find out if they have received the letters yet.