

5 Steps to Acquiring Excellent Letters of Recommendation

Step 1: When selecting faculty members to approach for letters of recommendation, applicants should consider the following factors

Step 2: How to ask the Professor

Step 3: Take these materials to the meeting

Step 4: Checking In

Step 5: Follow Up

Generally, admissions committees are impressed when faculty members go above and beyond what might be considered the minimal effort when writing letters of recommendation. Also, the letters of recommendation should, as much as possible, add credibility to the applicant's personal statement. For example, if the applicant mentions that a research project Professor Jones supervised was a major motivation for applying to graduate school, the applicant ought to solicit a letter of recommendation from Professor Jones that discusses, among other things, that research project.

Step 1:

You shouldn't just suddenly appear in a professor's doorway and ask for a letter of recommendation. Instead, visit your professors often during your undergraduate years. Write them cards during the holidays, and send emails updating them on your adventures and activities. Then, when you know you are going to graduate school make appointments with them to discuss your graduate school plans. Show them your targeted schools, ask them for recommendations, and discuss your motivations. Usually, the professors will bring up the question of letter of recommendation themselves.

Do the faculty members know the applicant well enough to be able to write a letter that is sufficiently detailed and nuanced to influence the admissions committee?

Do the faculty members have records of professional achievement sufficient to convince the admissions committee that they are well-placed to consider the applicant's potential as a graduate student?

Do the faculty members have reputations for being thoughtful and conscientious enough to take the time to write a detailed letter of recommendation on the applicant's behalf?

Step 2:

Consider this: "Dr. Johnson would you be comfortable making a strong recommendation for me for graduate study _____?" If the answer is less than enthusiastic, consider your other options.

Also ask: "Dr. Johnson, what will you be able to say about me?" This is a tough question to ask, but when do you want to find out? Before or after your choice graduate school does?

Always stress the date when you're going to apply, as in "Dr. Lee, I'll be applying by November 5. Will you be able to have the letter ready by then?" Never talk about the deadline. Avoid needing a letter just before or after the end of the term. Allow a professor two or six weeks to write your letter. Otherwise, it may start out like this: "Paul, from what I can remember, was usually prompt, and had good handwriting...." This is even worse if your name is not Paul.

Step 3:

Statement of Purpose

Your transcript, or a list of your most important class with grades for each class.

A paper or a lab showing some of your best work.

A resume or a curriculum vitae, especially if the professor doesn't know about some of your work or internship experiences.

Copies of all correspondence you have had with targeted graduate programs.

A list of the other professors you plan to ask for letters.

All the stamps, envelopes, and forms your professor might need, all filled out and ready to go.

Suggested "talking points," especially if this professor is not in your primary discipline. For example, ask your theatre professor to comment on whether your acting ability would be useful to you in teaching an introductory biology class for undergraduates, or ask your adviser to comment on your independent study project, of your tutoring of other students, or your service as a test proctor for a class or lab. Help professors find beneficial things to say about you, but remember: The professor will write about whatever she wants. You can only offer suggestions.

Step 4:

Check in with your Professor every Thursday to see if the letter is done. Be nice about it, but don't fall off the radar screen.

Step 5:

Be sure to give each professor a warm and sincere thank you card once the letter has been submitted on your behalf.