

Getting a Good Letter of Recommendation

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According to a recent survey of graduate school admission committees, the three most important graduate school admission criteria are one's GPA, Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores, and letters of recommendation (Keith-Spiegel, 1991; Norcross, Hanych, & Terranova, 1996). While many students understand the importance of letters of recommendation, many don't realize how to get a good letter of recommendation. Let me give you four tips that should help: make a face-to-face request for the letter of recommendation, give faculty enough time to write the letter, provide lots of information, and be organized.

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Face-to-Face Request

It is very important to make your request for a letter of recommendation face-to-face. First, a face-to-face request gives you the opportunity to make sure the faculty member has time to write a letter of recommendation and that the letter will be *good*. Keep in mind there are a number of reasons why a professor might not be able to write a good letter of recommendation for you, so don't take a "no" response personally. For example, I turned down one student because she had only been a student in one of my classes: I didn't feel that I knew her well enough to write a good letter. In addition, although a professor could probably put together a letter, consider that faint praise can be damaging. If the only thing a professor knows about a student is that they attended class regularly and passed all of the exams, will the letter of recommendation really be helpful, or will the letter end up hurting their chances for admission?

Second, a face-to-face request gives the faculty member an opportunity to ask clarifying questions. Asking clarifying questions is especially helpful for the more complicated application procedures. For example, which letters are mailed directly to the graduate school and which letters are returned to the student? which envelopes must have the professor's signature on the seal? Students applying to law and medical schools have a particularly complicated application process, so a face-to-face request can circumvent missing or late letters of recommendation.

Time

Time is a precious commodity in our society, especially among faculty who have to write letters of recommendation

for several different students within a relatively short time frame. In order to give professors ample time to write and revise a letter of recommendation, you should make your first request about 4 weeks before the letter should be mailed to the graduate program or returned to you. Four weeks may seem like a long time, but faculty have to juggle letter writing in among their other responsibilities. In addition, the 4 weeks gives faculty time to revise and polish the letter before it is mailed.

The time needed for subsequent letters of recommendation will vary for each faculty member. For example, I need about 1–2 weeks to write additional letters. I have a rapid turnaround for subsequent letters because I make a file for each student who requests a letter of recommendation from me. When I receive subsequent requests, I sit down with the original letter of recommendation and a copy of the program requirements and I then make modifications to the original letter so the new letter more closely fits the requirements of the new program. Consult individual faculty members to ensure that they will have enough time to write additional letters of recommendation.

Information

As faculty sit down to write a letter of recommendation they often find they cannot remember important information about a student. To solve the problem the psychology faculty at Saint Vincent College have constructed an information packet which students must complete before they can obtain a letter of recommendation. (The packet is summarized in Table 1.) As you can see in Table 1 we request information about a student's academic, extracurricular, and personal

experiences as well as their personal characteristics. The information we obtain from the form allows us to write well-thought-out letters of recommendation.

Your psychology department may not have a form like the one used at Saint Vincent College, but you can easily provide detailed information to faculty writing letters of recommendation for you. Start by listing the characteristics for which the graduate school wants information. Then under each characteristic describe how you meet that characteristic.

For example, perhaps Acme University wants information on your moral character, motivation to complete graduate school, and academic ability. You could create an information sheet like the one shown in Figure 1. In the information sheet you would list the important characteristics and how you demonstrate each. Furthermore, because there is substantial overlap between desired characteristics for graduate programs, you may only need to create one information sheet for all the programs you are applying to.

Be Concrete

Increasingly, graduate admission committees are insisting on evidence to support claims made in letters of recommendation. It's no longer sufficient to say, "Susie is motivated." Faculty need to provide evidence that Susie is, in fact, motivated.

Providing evidence can be troublesome. Faculty don't keep copies of student papers, quizzes, or descriptions of student's participation in the classroom. To aid faculty you can create a portfolio of your academic work which faculty can then refer to as they write your letter of recommendation. Portfolios are particularly helpful because faculty can see, through your papers and exams, how you've improved over your undergraduate career.

An alternative to a portfolio is to keep an electronic record of your activities during your undergraduate career. For example, I have to review my performance annually as part of the tenure process. I know my memory is often faulty, so I keep an electronic file on my desktop that lists what activity I performed and when the activity occurred. You could create a similar document and give it to faculty as an aid for writing the letter of recommendation.

Organization

Category	Information
Instructions and checklist	Discuss the letter of recommendation with each faculty member <i>face-to-face</i> . Attach a copy of your unofficial transcript.
Demographic information	Name, campus and permanent address, phone numbers
Academic information	Major, minor, GPAs, completion of certificate programs, supporting course work, standardized test scores, academic awards, honor society membership
Experiences	Describe internship(s), independent research, work experiences, extracurricular activities (such as participation in activities of Psi Chi, Psych Club).
Personal experiences	Describe academic strengths, academic weaknesses (and how have to tried to remedy them), why you are qualified for graduate school.
Personal characteristics	Provide concrete examples of your dependability, intelligence, initiative, written communication skills, oral communication skills, interpersonal skills.

and other materials you will forward to faculty members. One simple organization technique is to paper-clip the form, program description, and envelope together. Then, to keep all of your materials together, place them in a folder or large envelope. Remember that you will have to create a folder or envelope for each faculty member who is writing letters of recommendation for you.

An additional organizational tip is to type a list of the schools you are applying to in chronological order with the most immediate deadlines first. (See Figure 1 for an example.) The chronological list makes it easy for faculty members to complete letters of recommendation on time.

Additional Hints

One strategy you might consider is to ask individual faculty to comment on

specific skills or abilities in the letter of recommendation. In other words, rather than have three faculty members try to address all of your characteristics in the letter of recommendation, ask each faculty member to focus on one or two characteristics. For example, you might ask Professor Adams to describe your academic ability and motivation and ask Professor Brown to describe your written and oral communication skills. If you choose to use this tip, make sure that the combination of all the letters covers all the characteristics mentioned by the individual graduate program.

You should also provide faculty with a mailing address, including the name of an individual or committee, for each graduate program. Without a mailing address any letter of recommendation appears unprofessional (see Figure 1).

You can also utilize other resources to aid the entire application process. Some



Kirsten L. Rewey, PhD, received her MS and PhD from Texas Christian University under the expert guidance of Dr. Don Dansereau. After receiving her PhD, she completed a two-year postdoctoral fellowship with Dr. John Bransford at Vanderbilt University and one year as a replacement instructor at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Dr. Rewey then spent the next six years teaching at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Penn., where she also founded and moderated the local Psi Chi chapter. In 1999 she joined the psychology faculty at her undergraduate alma mater, Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, where she is also co-advisor for the Psi Chi chapter. Dr. Rewey's research interests include cognition, especially student learning strategies and textbook design, gender, and the teaching of psychology. She is a member of numerous national and regional associations and enjoys presenting research at annual meetings and conventions. Dr. Rewey was inducted

resources are listed at the end of this article and can be obtained from the American Psychological Association, the American Psychological Society, the Psi Chi National Office, and local or Internet bookstores. If your college or university has a graduate program, you can also talk to graduate students as a source of information.

In conclusion, with some advanced planning you can help faculty write a *good* letter of recommendation for you. Remember to make a face-to-face request, give faculty ample time to write the letter, give the faculty lots of concrete information, and be organized. ☞

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Dorothy (Dot) Matricks
Campus P.O. Box 123
ext. 4567

Deadline: February 15

Program: Counseling PhD
Address: Dr. Pat Jones
Department of Counseling and Social Work
Whattsamatta University
Frostbite Falls, Minnesota 67890

Return envelope to me (self-addressed envelope is attached)

Please comment on my:

Motivation to finish graduate school

- held down a full-time job while completing the bachelor's degree
- completed a bachelor's thesis
- presented thesis at a local conference

Academic achievement

- membership in Psi Chi
- academic scholarships
- named on the Dean's/President's List for four semesters

Career goals

- national advocacy for the physically disabled

Deadline: March 1

Program: Counseling PsyD
Address: Graduate Admissions Committee
c/o Ms. W. E. Coyote
Acme University
1000 Warner Blvd.
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 12345

Please comment on my:

Motivation to finish graduate school

- held down a full-time job while completing the bachelor's degree
- completed a bachelor's thesis
- presented thesis at a local conference

Academic achievement

- membership in Psi Chi
- academic scholarships
- named on the Dean's/President's List for four semesters

Moral character

- successfully completed a course on ethics in psychology

Figure 1. Hypothetical information sheet for Dot Matricks. Notice that Dot has (a) provided contact information so that faculty can easily reach her for questions or concerns, (b) organized the information in chronological order, (c) included the address for each program, (d) provided special instructions where necessary, and (e) listed the characteristics that each graduate program would like commented upon and evidence that she possesses each of the characteristics.