Letters of Recommendation

Who should you ask for a letter of recommendation? When should you ask, and what materials do you need to provide? How do you even go about asking? You will need to carefully review the requirements of the college to which you are applying to see how many letters you need and how they must be formatted, but here is some general information.

What is a Letter of Recommendation?

A letter of recommendation (sometimes called a reference letter) is a document meant to verify that you are who you say you are (someone qualified to attend graduate school). It is intended to paint a clearer picture of you and capture qualities that can’t be measured by your GPA or test scores. The author of the document will most likely discuss your achievements, motivation, skills, and character.

Letters of recommendation are an important part of your application to graduate school. Many qualified people will be contending for limited space within a program. A good letter of recommendation can really set you apart from other applicants. For example, if you’re applying for a doctoral program, it’s likely that all candidates will have research experience, but if your professor writes about what a valuable asset you were to his or her lab, you’ve immediately been made a stronger candidate.

Who Should I Ask?

Potential writers of letters of recommendation include your advisor, professors, and employers. You should be confident that this person knows you well and would be able to write you a positive letter of recommendation. Still, always ask them if they would be willing. No matter how good of a relationship you have with this person, never assume you are entitled to a letter of recommendation from them. Phrase your request politely in a way that allows them to tactfully decline if necessary. For example, you could ask, “Do you feel as though you know me well enough to write a positive letter of recommendation?”

Unless there are extenuating circumstances, you should meet in person to request a letter of recommendation. During the meeting, you can have a candid conversation about whether or not your potential reference feels they can write you a good letter of recommendation. They’ll be able to express any reservations, such as not knowing you very well outside of the classroom, and the two of you will be able to discuss these together. You will also be able to go over the specific content you would like to see included in the letter. Your professor or employer will likely not remember every single one of your accomplishments – don’t be afraid to bring them up. Additionally, be prepared to discuss your reasons for applying to graduate school, as well as your ultimate career goals. If you struggle to articulate these, it makes it difficult for someone else to be confident that you’re a good fit for graduate school.

Remember that a person can only attest to what they’ve seen of you. If you showed up to class every day and did well in a professor’s course, they’ll be able to write about that, but if you never sought them out during office hours, spoke up in class, or went the extra mile in any other way, their letter about you is more than likely going to be very brief: “Jane Doe took my advanced mathematics class. She did well on her homework
and exams.” People reviewing your application can gather as much from your transcript. You want to ask someone who knows you well enough to provide a thorough description of your qualifications, accomplishments, and character.

**When Should I Ask?**

Do not wait until the last minute to ask for a letter of recommendation. It puts the person you ask in an incredibly awkward position. They may have to decline simply because they don’t have enough time to accommodate your request, or they may not be able to devote much time to writing your letter. The sooner you can ask, the better. At the bare minimum, give someone at least a month, though more time is always appreciated (and keep in mind that this may vary by professor, which is why it’s always better to contact them sooner rather than later). Keep in mind that professors are busier at the end of the semester, too! As such, they may need more time depending at what point in the school year you approach them.

**What Do They Need From Me?**

It’s likely that the person you ask has done this before and has a specific list of what they would like from you. This will likely include an updated CV, a list of specific achievements or qualities you’d like them to mention, and an unofficial transcript. They may also want a copy of your personal statement. Don’t give everything to them in pieces. Prepare all the necessary materials and tuck them in a folder to keep them organized.

Additionally, include a postage-paid envelope for each school. This allows your reference to just send the letter off when they’re done writing it, and it also ensures that the letter arrives at the right place. Do ask them to notify you when they’ve mailed the letter. If it’s getting to be a few weeks before the deadline and you haven’t heard anything, it’s perfectly alright to politely remind them of the upcoming due date.

Finally, make sure to send a handwritten thank you note expressing your gratitude. Regardless of whether or not you get into the school, this person has dedicated a substantial amount of time to vouching for you, and they deserve to be thanked.

**How Do I Build a Relationship with Someone?**

There are a lot of ways to build up a relationship with a faculty member so that when the day comes, they’ll be able to confidently write you a positive letter of recommendation. Taking multiple classes with a professor can be a good place to start. You can also get involved with research or ask to be a Student Academic Apprentice (SAA). Don’t be afraid to go to office hours and introduce yourself.

If the school to which you are applying has a form that it asks references to fill out, take a look at the questions it asks. Do you feel as though your professor knows you in the majority of these areas? It’s not the end of the world if there are one or two questions they indicate they don’t know you well enough to answer, but any more than that and it begins to beg the question of why you asked this person to be a reference when they clearly don’t know you very well.
Additional Resources

**Getting a Good Letter of Recommendation** by Kirsten Rewey, Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, published by Eye on Psi Chi. This article includes a sample information sheet that you would provide your professor, listing relevant information about yourself and information you would specifically like them to include.

**Graduate School Applications: Requesting Recommendation Letters** published by Purdue OWL. Purdue OWL provides general information about requesting letters of recommendation. They also have information about researching graduate programs and writing other parts of your application.

**12 Don’ts for Getting Letters of Recommendation for Grad School** by Tara Kuther, Ph.D., published by About Education. Kuther articulates several mistakes you’ll want to avoid making. Her article makes it clear that by being considerate and organized, many of these can be easily avoided.

As always, if you have any questions about letters of recommendation or any other part of the graduate school application process, the McNair Program is here to help. Stop by our office and we’ll be happy to assist you in any way we can.