

Asking for Letters of Recommendation

Almost every graduate program will require letters of recommendation. A letter of recommendation is a detailed discussion (usually from a faculty member, supervisor, or employer) of your personal qualities, qualifications, accomplishments, and experiences that make you deserving of admission into a particular graduate program to which you've applied.

Don't underestimate the importance of these letters; while your transcript, test scores, and personal statement/admissions essay carry the most weight, a good letter of recommendation can be the deciding factor in the admission process. Strong letters can strengthen your application and make up for any weaknesses you may have in other parts of your admission application.

It is important to have good relationships with your references. If you haven't done so already, begin developing strong relationships with one or two of your professors and employers or supervisors. It will pay off in the long run when they can write you a strong letter of recommendation and help you get into the graduate program of your choice.

How many letters of recommendation will I need?

Each institution will let you know how many letters they require. Most graduate programs require two or more. We recommend that you send only the amount of letters requested by the program; admissions committees do not have time to read extra credentials.

Who should I ask for letters of recommendation?

Deciding who to ask is the most difficult. We recommend choosing references who know you well and can attest to your ability to succeed at the graduate level. References should know you well, know you long enough to write with authority, be able to describe your work positively, and know your educational and career goals. Best choices for letters of recommendation include professors and employers or supervisors, particularly those that have supervised you in volunteer or paid work related to your graduate field.

When should I approach potential references?

Be courteous and give your references at least one month to prepare your letters of recommendation. Keep in mind that your professors and employers/supervisors are busy people.

As the application deadline approaches, check in with your references to make sure the letters are sent on time. However, do not nag them. We also suggest contacting the graduate program to make sure all your application materials, including letters of recommendation, were received on time.

How should I approach potential references?

Decide who you want to ask, then schedule an appointment with your potential references to discuss your request in person. Do not make the request via email. Be prepared to articulate your interest and reasons for attending graduate school.

When you meet with them, ask your potential references if they feel they can write you a strong letter of recommendation. Pay attention to their demeanor. If you sense reluctance to write the letter or they say "no," ask someone else.

What information do my references need to write good letters?

Don't assume that your references will know or remember everything about you. Provide them with a file of your background information and necessary recommendation materials:

- Unofficial transcript (if giving to a professor, note courses you took with him/her)
- Resume or curriculum vitae
- Admissions essays/statements of purpose
- Your professional goals
- A copy of your best work (research paper, projects, publication, etc.)
- Due dates for recommendations
- Recommendation forms (if provided by the graduate program)
- Stamped, addressed envelopes to send forms and letters directly to the schools
- Any other information you think is relevant

What about confidentiality?

A "confidential" letter means you, the applicant, cannot see the letter before it is sent to the graduate program. This is typically indicated by the reference sealing the envelope and signing his or her name or initial over the seal.

The recommendation forms supplied by graduate programs require you to decide whether to waive or retain your rights to see the letter of recommendation. As you decide whether to retain your rights, keep in mind that confidential letters tend to carry more weight with admissions committees. Some references will not write a letter unless it is confidential. Others will provide you with a copy of each letter, even if it is confidential. If you are unsure of what to do, discuss it with your reference.

Don't forget to thank your references!

Remember, the individuals who are writing letters on your behalf have agreed to take on extra work in order to help you get to the next step - graduate school. Send them a handwritten thank you note so they'll know how much you appreciate their effort and kindness!