

Requesting Graduate School Letters of Recommendation

How important are letters of recommendation?

Letters of recommendation are required for almost every graduate school application and are a very important part of the application process. Usually grades and test scores factor in most heavily; however, your letters of recommendation could be the deciding factor in the admission process. Strong letters of recommendation can strengthen your application and if there are deficiencies in your application, they can help to outweigh them.

How many letters of recommendation do I need?

Each institution will let you know how many letters it requires. Generally, you will be asked for three letters. We recommend that you send only the amount of letters requested. Admissions committees do not have enough time to read extra credentials.

Whom should I ask for letters of recommendation?

The best letter writers are those that know you well and can provide an evaluation of your ability to perform and succeed at the graduate level. If you are planning to attend graduate school, take every opportunity to get to know and talk with your professors: go to office hours, ask questions in class, seek advice about your career, do independent research or study with a professor whose recommendation you may want.

Graduate and professional school admissions people tell us the following make the best letter writers:

- Someone who knows you well
- Someone with the title of "Professor"
- Someone who is a professor at the school granting your baccalaureate degree
- Someone who has earned the degree which you are seeking in your graduate work
- Someone with an advanced degree who has supervised you in a job or internship aligned with the graduate program you are pursuing
- Someone who has academically evaluated you in an upper-division class
- Note: letters from family friends, political figures, and the like usually are discouraged and may, in fact, be detrimental.

How do I approach potential letter writers?

First, make a list of professors and/or supervisors who will be your best advocates. Then, set up an appointment 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.

Letters of recommendation are written strictly on a voluntary basis; a faculty member or employer may decline to write them. The best approach is to ask potential letter writers if they are willing to write you a strong letter. If you sense reluctance or the answer is no, ask someone else.

When should I approach letter writers? What if I plan to take some time off before I go to graduate school?

Professors and supervisors want to help you and are pleased to write on your behalf; however, they are usually involved in many activities. Faculty are especially busy during the months of November and December. Be considerate and courteous of your letter writers' time and workload, and approach them at least two months in advance of your request.

A good time to approach letter writers is early fall of your senior year if you plan to attend graduate school immediately following graduation. If you ask for letters before this time, ask during the school year; sometimes professors are hard to find in summer.

If you plan to take some time off before going to graduate school, don't wait until you want to apply to graduate school to ask for letters. Your professors could be on sabbatical, or you may not be fresh in their minds anymore. So, ask professors for a "general" letter of recommendation before you leave HSU. When you are ready to apply to graduate school, contact professors again, and ask them to update your letters.

How can I go about getting good letters of recommendation?

Since your best letters will come from those who know you well, make an effort to get to know your professors and/or supervisors. A few ways you can do this are to speak up in class, select courses with small class sizes, take more than one class from a professor, do research for a professor, take on optional projects (e.g., write an honor thesis or start an outreach program at work), and regularly attend office hours.

The best strategy you can use to get a good letter of recommendation, particularly if a professor does not have a long acquaintance with you, is to provide your letter writer with ample information about you. This way, you will get a letter that includes concrete details about you, instead of a letter that contains only your grade or class rank, which is of limited value.

What information do my letter writers need to write good letters?

You can help your letter writers write enlightening letters by giving each of them a portfolio that includes:

1. A cover note that includes:
 - Information on how to get in touch with you in case they need to reach you
 - What you would like emphasized in each letter
 - A list of schools to which you are applying, and due dates, with the earliest due date at the top
 - Any other information that is relevant
 - Open and close your note with thanks and acknowledgement that the letter writer's time is valuable and that this letter is important to your professional future.
 - A picture to remind them who you are.
2. Recommendation forms - make it easy for letter writer to complete forms in a timely manner, complete the following:
 - Applicant information typed in
 - Recommender's name, title, contact info (telephone, fax, address etc) typed in
 - Your unofficial transcripts (note courses you took with them)
 - A draft of your statement of purpose
3. A copy of your best work in the course (with instructor comments on it), lab evaluations, projects, publications etc.
4. Your resume
5. Stamped and addressed envelopes if they are to be mailed to the school.