

Letters of Recommendation and Writing Samples

(This document is for information purposes only.)

Letters of Recommendation

All graduate program applications require letters of recommendation. These letters are some of the most important components of your application and need to be taken very seriously.

1. Know the number of letters you need

- a. Once you have selected the schools you want to apply to, look for the number of letters that that program requires in the application.
- b. Applications usually require 2-4 letters, with 3 being the average. You want to make sure that you are requesting the correct number of letters so that your application gets full consideration.
- c. Avoid sending more letters than are requested and avoid sending too few letters.

2. Know the requirements

- a. Along with knowing the number of letters needed, you need to know any requirements that the program has for the letter.
- b. Find out if the program requires specific kinds of recommenders.
 - i. *Example: University A requires 2 academic (professor) recommendations and 1 personal (supervisor) recommendation, while University B requires 3 academic (professor) recommendations and will not accept any personal recommenders.*
- c. All programs have a digital system set up so that your letter writers are sent a request to their email address directly from the university.
- d. Some programs request that your recommenders upload a PDF of their pre-written letter. Other programs will ask specific questions about you (the applicant) and the recommender must answer specific question prompts. Some will ask for both.

3. Who to ask for a letter of recommendation

- a. Once you have identified the requirements (see above), you can formulate a list of possible recommenders.
- b. Ideally, you want to identify professors (and supervisors if appropriate) who know you well and can speak to you as a student.
- c. There are many kinds of professor/academic recommenders that you may want to consider: *(note: these are just examples, and you may have another type of recommender that will work for you)*
 - i. *Recommender type 1:* you have taken several classes with this professor, and they can write a letter about your academic success.
 - ii. *Recommender type 2:* you took a class with this professor, you speak regularly in class, went to their office hours, and have a good academic relationship with them. They can write a letter about your academics and your commitment to the subject.
 - iii. *Recommender type 3:* you participate in an extracurricular activity where this professor is involved. Examples can include undergraduate research supervisors, club sponsors, volunteer opportunities, student organizations, professional organizations, etc. They can speak to your ability to balance academics and extracurricular activities.
- d. Also consider whether your potential recommender will be able to write you a positive letter of recommendation. There are many circumstances and situations where a professor may not be the appropriate person to ask for a letter even though they may fit one of the types above.
 - i. It is better to have a neutral letter from a professor that does not know you well, than to have a negative or absent letter (see FAQ below).

4. How to ask for a letter of recommendation

- a. Once you have identified appropriate professors/professionals/etc., you need to request an in-person meeting with each of them individually.
 - i. It is not recommended that you email your potential letter writers to request letters.
- b. Your letters of recommendation are a very important component of your application. It is important to have a one-on-one conversation with your recommenders about:
 - i. Your desire to attend graduate school
 - ii. The programs you wish to apply to
 - iii. Their willingness to write you letters
- c. Remember that your recommenders write a letter for each program that you apply to, and they are inevitably going to be writing letters for other students as well. Be respectful of their time.
- d. **You need to ask for letters of recommendation early in the process. It is a good rule of thumb to give your recommenders at least 1 month advance notice before their recommendations are due.**
 - i. Do not ask a potential recommender to write you a letter at the last minute, unless absolutely necessary.

5. What you should provide your letter writers

- a. You need to provide each person who agrees to write you a letter this information (a spreadsheet may be useful to organize the information):
 - i. The name of each university/program
 - ii. The name of the degree you are applying for (*examples: MA in Anthropology, MS in Forensic Anthropology, etc.*)
 - iii. The name(s) of potential advisors
 - iv. The due dates for the letter of recommendations
- b. You should also give them a copy of your personal statement and CV.
- c. You can either give each recommender a physical copy of the information and documents above during (or after) the meeting where you request their recommendation. Or you can email them digital versions of the above information/documents immediately after the meeting.

Writing Sample

Some graduate program applications require a writing sample, however, most do not.

1. Do you need a writing sample?

- a. Carefully read the application instructions for your selected schools.
- b. If you are not sure if a writing sample is required, you can ask the graduate coordinator or secretary of that school.
- c. If a writing sample is not required but there is a mechanism to submit one in the application, seriously consider as to whether it will benefit your application. The absence of a writing sample in this case will not harm your application but submitting one could be used (either positively or negatively) when the program is considering your application.

2. Know the requirements

- a. If a program requires a writing sample, they will typically give specific requirements on the type and/or length of the sample.
- b. Pay very close attention to these requirements and do not deviate from the instructions.
- c. You can contact the graduate coordinator or secretary of that school if you need additional clarity on the instructions.

3. Choose the right writing sample

- a. Select the most appropriate sample for the requirements from your written academic work.

- b. Unless otherwise specified, a writing sample should be a traditional essay or paper that was submitted for course.
- c. Your writing sample is how you will prove to the program and a potential advisor that you are able to write a scholarly paper and do not require additional instruction in writing.
- d. Your writing sample should highlight your strengths in these areas:
 - i. Research – your ability to do background thorough background research with citations.
 - ii. Essay structure – Your ability to appropriately structure your essay or paper in a logical manner.
 - iii. Grammar and syntax – Your use of proper grammatical rules and the appropriate use of academic jargon.
- e. If you have done undergraduate research, you could submit portions of a research proposal or final paper (like an honor's thesis). This type of writing is a good example of your research-based writing.
- f. Have someone outside of the field read your writing sample. Even if you received a favorable grade for it in a class, does not mean it highlights your strengths as a writer.
- g. Your writing sample does not need to be on a topic related to your major or proposed future research. **Select the best example you have from your academic portfolio.**

Frequently Asked Questions about Letters of Recommendation and Writing Samples

- **Can I submit more (or fewer) letters of recommendation than are required?**
 - o You should only submit the required number of letters. If they allow additional letters, you could consider whether you have an additional strong letter. Additional letters will not necessarily benefit you if they are not of high quality.
 - o Some programs will not consider your application if you do not meet the minimum number of letters.
- **Should I “waive my right to access” letters of recommendation?**
 - o Most applications ask if you “waive your right to access” your letters of recommendation. If you waive your right, the letters will remain confidential, and you cannot ask to read them. If you do not waive your right, you may request to read your letters of recommendation.
 - o Some recommenders will not write a letter if it is not confidential.
 - o Some recommenders will not write a comprehensive letter if it is not confidential.
 - o If you wish to retain this right, make sure you talk to your recommenders about this before submitting your application.
- **Should I ask for a letter from a professor who is highly respected in the field, but I know they won’t write me a good letter?**
 - o This is up to you. Positive letters of recommendation can mean the difference between being accepted into a program and not being accepted.
 - o The reputation of your recommenders should be considered but may not be to your benefit.
- **Should I give my recommenders a present for writing me letters?**
 - o No. There are state and university rules that govern the kinds of gifts that a professor can accept. Recommenders do not write letters in exchange for gifts. Writing letters is part of a professor’s position and you should not be compensating them in any way.
- **Should I send an email reminding my recommenders when the deadline approaches?**
 - o That is perfectly okay. Try to limit the number of reminders, but a gentle reminder email is a good idea.
- **What if one of my recommenders is going to miss the recommendation deadline?**
 - o Speak with the graduate coordinator or secretary of the programs to see what options are available. Some programs will accept late letters, but this is not guaranteed.
 - o You may need to ask an additional professor to write a last-minute letter, but this should be your very last option.
- **What if I do not want to meet my recommenders face-to-face to ask for a recommendation?**
 - o You do not need to meet your recommenders, but it is to your benefit to do so.
 - o You will get an idea for how receptive they are to writing you a letter. If you get the sense that they do not want to write a letter or are hesitant, you may want to find a different writer.
 - o This is an opportunity for you to talk about things that you want included in your letter. Personalized letters are vitally important for your application to stand out.
- **What if a professor I ask for a recommendation declines to write me letters?**
 - o This is okay. There are many reasons why a professor may decline (e.g., sabbatical, impending deadlines, not a good fit to write a letter, etc.).
 - o Use what you learned to inform how you select your next recommender.
- **Should I submit a writing sample even if it is not required?**
 - o This is up to you. If you feel that you have a strong writing sample, you may consider submitting one even if you are not required to.

- **Does my writing sample have to be something that I turned in for a class?**
 - No, unless it is specifically stated in the application requirements. This can be any form of writing, including a brand-new essay.