

# Career Connection

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## Guide to Great Recommendation Letters



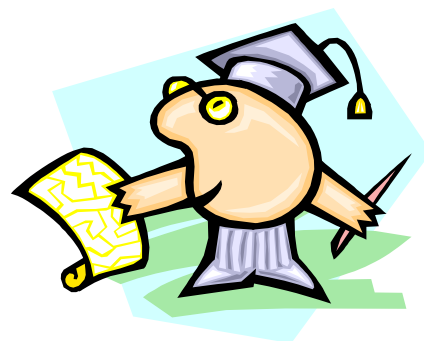
Nearly every graduate program requires applicants to submit letters of recommendation. Don't underestimate the importance of these letters. While your transcript, standardized test scores, and personal statement/admissions essay are vital components to your application, an excellent letter of recommendation can make up for weaknesses in any of these areas.

A well-written letter of recommendation provides admissions committees with information that isn't found elsewhere in the application. A letter of recommendation is a detailed discussion, from a faculty member, of the personal qualities, accomplishments, and experiences that make you unique and perfect for the programs to which you've applied.

### Who To Ask?

Most graduate programs require two or more letters of recommendation. Choosing your letter-writers often is difficult. Consider faculty members, administrators, internship/co-operative education supervisors, and employers. The persons you ask to write your letters should...

- know you well
- know you long enough to write with authority
- know your work
- describe your work positively
- have a high opinion of you
- know where you are applying
- know your educational and career goals
- be able to favorably compare you with your peers
- be able to write a good letter



Keep in mind that *no one person* will satisfy all of these criteria. Aim for a set of letters that cover the range of your skills. Ideally, letters should cover your academic and scholastic skills, research abilities and experiences, and applied experiences (e.g., co-operative education, internships, related work experience).

### Approaching Referees

When you approach potential referees, ask if they know you well enough to write a meaningful letter. Pay attention to their demeanor. If you sense reluctance, thank them and ask someone else. Remember that it is *best to ask in the quarter prior to submitting your application*. As the end of the quarter approaches, faculty may hesitate because of time restraints.

### Provide Information

The best thing that you can do to ensure that your letters cover all the bases is to provide your referees with all the necessary information. *Don't assume* that they will remember anything about you. (I know, you're quite memorable, but think about what it must be like to have 150 or more students each semester!)

Make an appointment to speak with your letter writers. Give your letter writers *plenty of time* (three to four weeks at minimum). Provide a file with background information that contains copies of the following:

- transcript
- resume or vita
- admissions essays
- courses you've taken with them
- research experiences
- internship and other applied experiences
- honor societies to which you belong
- awards you've won
- work experience
- professional goals
- due date for the application
- copy of the application recommendation forms



### Confidentiality

The recommendation forms supplied by graduate programs require you to decide whether to waive or retain your rights to see recommendation. As you decide whether to retain your rights, remember that *confidential letters* tend to carry *more* weight with admissions committees. In addition, many faculty will not write a recommendation letter unless it is confidential. Other faculty may provide you with a copy of each letter, even if it is confidential. If you are unsure of what to decide, discuss it with your referee.

As the application deadline approaches, check back with your referees to ensure that the letters were sent on time (but don't nag!). Contacting the graduate programs to inquire whether your materials were received is also appropriate and recommended.

Last, but definitely not least, be sure to send thank you notes to each of your referees for taking the time to help you complete your application.

Good Luck!

