How to Get an Awesome Letter of Recommendation for Graduate School (That Will Actually Help You Get Accepted)

Getting a fantastic letter of recommendation for graduate school is one of the most important steps for getting into your graduate school of choice.

What should you do to get the best grad school recommendation letters possible?

We asked deans, professors, advisors, and program directors to answer the following question:

**In your opinion, what is one mistake that students should avoid when trying to get letters of recommendation for their graduate school application?**

Thirty-eight generous faculty members contributed to this article with their best advice for getting a good recommendation letter for your graduate school application.
Don’t Be Shy About Reminding Your Recommender Why You Are Awesome

The number one mistake you should avoid when asking for letters of recommendation is making the assumption that the professor knows everything there is to know about you that will assist in writing the letter.

Your request should be professional, reflective and thorough.

**Professional:** Write the request as a formal email and address the faculty member by his or her title. If you send an overly casual request with spelling or grammatical errors, you are sending the message that you are not taking the application process seriously.
**Reflective:** Share key points regarding your experiences with the professor that validate the request. Reflect on the direct learning opportunities that you had with the professor that inspired your decision to apply for graduate school. Perhaps you assisted with a research project or completed a study abroad experience. Be specific, as this will increase the likelihood that the professor actually remembers who you are.

**Thorough:** Give the professor materials for reference. Attach your résumé and all other application materials that you have completed, including a letter of intent that explains why you selected the program of interest. Consider writing a draft letter of recommendation for yourself and sharing it with the professor. This eye-opening activity will boost your confidence as you highlight your many excellent qualities!

**Maggie Daniels, Ph.D.**

Professor of Tourism and Events Management

George Mason University
The three most common mistakes I’ve observed are students who assume that:

1. Professors will know what strengths to emphasize. Not only should the request be accompanied by a resume, but I find it particularly helpful in writing a recommendation if the student has provided some specific talking points (both strengths and weaknesses) that the student would like me to address.

2. Professors prepare these letters of recommendations all the time and for most of their students. For me this is untrue. I teach more than 200 students a year so it would be infeasible for me to write a letter of recommendation for each of my students. I typically require that I know the student in some professional capacity outside of the classroom, before I agree to give a recommendation.
3. Professors have the expertise to comment on the student’s fit for a specific position. I do believe that professors in general are qualified to address the question of the candidate’s suitability for an academic career (in particular their fit for a PhD program), but I don’t believe I am the best judge of how well a student will perform in, for example, an external consulting position. As a result, my letter of recommendation might be discounted by some employers, relative to a letter that can speak directly to the student’s prior work experience.

**Shane Dikolli, PhD**

Associate Dean and Associate Professor of Accounting

Duke University

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Recommendation letters are highly regarded when reviewing applications.
The letters should highlight the qualities of the student's academic pursuit, indicating why the applicant is uniquely superior in comparison to the dozens of other applicants.

In particular, letters should highlight student accomplishments above the ability to get a good grade in a single class.

**Jason Kinser, D.Sc.**

Chair and Associate Professor of Computational & Data Sciences

George Mason University

In my experience here are the two most frequent mistakes:
1. Asking a professor for a recommendation without reminding them who you are. Often students have completed their undergraduate degree some years ago -- and then they "cold call" on a professor asking for a recommendation. Remember that professors have lots of student; so a gentle nudge re-introducing yourself and mentioning something perhaps memorable about your interactions goes a long way in persuading the professor to agree.

2. Not providing a resume and clearly articulating why you want to go to graduate school. A good recommendation letter must speak to not only past performance and accomplishments, but also how these would contribute to success in the student's chosen field of study and future aspirations. Help the recommender write you a compelling letter!

Ritu Agarwal, PhD
Senior Associate Dean, Professor, and Chair of Information Systems
University of Maryland
Only Ask for a Grad School Letter of
Recommendation from Someone Who Can Attest to
Your Ability to Succeed in the Program

When asking for a letter of recommendation keep in mind that you should
ask for letters from someone who can attest to your ability to succeed in the
program to which you are applying.

You want the letter writer to state clearly that:

1. You are suited to the program because of past school and/or work
   experience
2. You have the maturity to see through the commitment.

These are the two crucial factors. We are always reading letters to be sure the applicant knows why they are applying to our program in particular.

As an applicant, you can greatly assist your recommenders by supplying them with a copy of your personal statement (the letter or brief essay in which you are saying why you are applying and how you are prepared). This is even more important than your c.v., but an up to date c.v. is also useful.

Some recommenders will actually ask the student to draft the letter themselves, and then they finalize it with a few details. Don’t be surprised if this happens, and if it does, write the letter is as succinct and professional a manner as possible.

Keep in mind, no one reads between the lines. If you have an outstanding accomplishment or unusual interest, do not expect review committees to spot it in your c.v. Make sure you make it clear that in addition to academic or extracurricular credentials you have also done X or Y.
Review committees read hundreds of these letters. We look for red flags and highlights. The letters are usually fairly generic, and that is fine, but if you have had a bump along the road (time off for any reason, bad marks in a particular course, or anything else) be sure to explain it.

We are more likely to look favorably on someone who took a class outside their field, did poorly, but gave it a try, than on someone who played it safe just to keep their grades up.

Finally, are sure to ask you recommenders well in advance. If you are leaving school, ask if you can be in touch when you are ready to apply to graduate school. Ask for the letter at least four weeks in advance.

Follow up with a reminder. Be sure to check back. Don’t worry about being a nuisance, it is our job to supply you with recommendations if we have agreed to do so.

**Johanna Drucker**, PhD
Avoid asking for letters from individuals who are not familiar with or cannot assess your suitability for graduate school. These individuals may be able to provide a good character reference, but this is not sufficient for graduate school applications.

Graduate school reviewers will want to know from your recommendation letters that you:

- Have a solid technical foundation (also shown through your undergraduate GPA)
- Are able to quickly pick up new topics and information
• Are self-directed and self-motivated in a research environment
• Can balance personal initiative with receiving instructions/guidance
  (this also ties in to working in a team setting).

Request letters from people who understand these needs and can address your ability to perform in these areas.

Finally, make sure the person providing the recommendation letter has a positive perception of you, i.e., can write a favorable letter. You can assess this by talking with the letter writer before formally requesting the letter.

Bradley Adams, PhD
Associate Professor of Mechanical Engineering
Brigham Young University
Mistake: Earn a "C" in a professor's class and then ask that professor for a recommendation to grad school.

**Richard Baskerville, PhD**

Professor of Computer Information Systems

Georgia State University

I would advise graduate students to ask only professors from whom they have taken a small, upper division course in the field they plan to go to
graduate school in, and have earned an A from.

For History, it's best to ask a professor in their department who assigned a research paper or required significant writing.

If a professor has not seen much of a student's writing, or has only had a student in a big survey course, or has given a student anything lower than an A or A minus, he or she probably can't write the kind of strong, detailed letter that will help a student get into a good graduate program.

**Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, PhD**

Associate Professor of Late Imperial and Modern Chinese History

San Diego State University

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**It’s a Mistake to Focus Too Much on a Potential Recommender’s Credentials**
Students sometimes focus on the credentials of the letter writer. I would suggest that they should focus more on getting letters from people who can write letters with some depth.

Seek letters from people with whom you have worked closely and for some length of time. Their comments will be better informed and such letters should carry more weight.

Vidyanand Choudhary, PhD
Professor and Associate Dean, UCI Paul Merage School of Business
University of California—Irvine
Applicants really try to impress us with “titles”, even if they have limited working relationship with that person.

A CEO or C Suite title that doesn’t know you and writes an general / mediocre letter is not nearly as effective as a co worker, or direct manager or customer that can relate real situations that demonstrate the applicants skills and abilities.

**Treavor Peterson, MBA**
Managing Director of MBA Programs
Brigham Young University
When Requesting a Letter of Recommendation for Graduate School, Choose Someone Who Knows You Well

One mistake that I have seen over and over again is students asking for letters from professors who teach very large classes and who don't know the student personally.

If the student has spent some one on one time with the professor during office hours, and can honestly say there has been intellectual exchange and the professor has gotten to know the student, then that's fine. Too often I get students asking me for letters from my 200+ student class and they'll say "I was in your class and got an A".

This means my letter can only state: "This student was 1 of 200 and got an
A; the average for the class was B+".

I have been on committees reviewing graduate student applications and this type of letter takes points off the application.

**Elodie Ghedin, PhD**

Professor of Biology, and Global Public Health

New York University

When you ask for a recommendation letter, it’s good to know that a good letter contains information about how well the letter writer knows you and what can be recommended about you.

So, keep this in mind when asking for a recommendation letter:
1. A faculty member cannot comment on behaviors, attitudes or skills that they have not witnessed firsthand. So, if you have only taken a course from the faculty member, she usually can only describe your course grade and results.

2. Faculty members get many requests for letters; sometimes for letters that are never used. Writing these letters is time consuming, so you should first ask if the faculty member is willing and able to write a letter by the given deadline. Don’t assume she will write you one anyway. Ask well in advance of your deadline and be clear where and when the letter has to be sent.

3. Once she has agreed to write you a letter, it is often helpful for a student to provide the following information
   
a. What are the specifics of the job/graduate school you are applying for (what should the letter address?)

   b. What does the faculty member know about you that speaks to these requirements (e.g., did you give a very good presentation in class and the job requires good communication skills? Did
you work on a project and you finish a specific component using java/javascripts/SQL/... and the job requires technical skills).

Gondy Leroy, PhD
Professor of Management Information Systems
University of Arizona

Here is my suggestion regarding gathering the best recommendation letters possible for grad school applications.

Be thoughtful about inviting only colleagues, faculty members or superiors with whom you’ve worked closely, who genuinely know you well and valued your work, to write letters on your behalf.
Requests like these take time so make the process easier by supplying your resume and three key points you hope they’ll underscore in their letters based on their personal experience working directly with you. Make certain the key points are genuine and different so that the letters emphasize important but varied aspects of your strengths and skill sets.

And don’t make the mistake of only asking them to elaborate on simple, straightforward projects that ended well. Highlighting a difficult project that required special knowledge and a deft touch could illustrate how you turned a challenge into an opportunity.

As the old adage goes, “Smooth seas never made a skilled sailor.” Sometimes the obstacles we overcome speak louder about our character, tenacity, passion and work ethic than do our successes.

**Julia Cartwright, MA**

Chief of Staff & Senior Associate Dean for Communications, Promotion and Public Affairs & Clinical Associate Professor of Social and Behavioral Sciences
The whole idea of a letter of recommendation is to put student’s strengths and weaknesses in perspective.

This is possible only when the recommender knows the student well. One of the common mistakes a student makes is that s/he asks somebody to write a letter who doesn’t know him/her very well.

Many times, the students try to go for somebody very senior rather than somebody who knows them well but not very senior. This is a common mistake that needs to be avoided. The students should first check with the recommender if s/he is comfortable writing the letter and then based on the interest level, they should pick those who can nicely put student’s strengths
and weaknesses in perspective.

**Subodha Kumar**, PhD

Professor of Supply Chain, Marketing, Information Systems, and Statistical Science

Temple University

If I have worked with a student on a research project, or if I have first hand knowledge of a senior design project that a student has participated in, then I am able to write a much stronger letter of recommendation.

It is difficult to write a strong letter of recommendation if my only interaction with the student has been as a student in one of my classes, particularly if we had limited interactions outside of the classroom.
When you think about asking for a letter of recommendation, imagine yourself in the position of the letter writer. What does this person really know about you?

If you were in a large class where the assignments were graded by a teaching assistant, all the person can really say is what grade you got. Their letter will not help you. You’re better off asking someone who knows you by name, and who you have talked with often in one or preferably more than one class.
It’s also better if you ask the instructor of a class with a substantial project or paper. That way, instead of writing “Jane got an A,” the recommender can say “Jane completed a memorable project/paper on topic x, which i was particularly impressed with for reason y.”

Always ask if someone would be willing to write you a letter—never just enter their email address as a letter writer without asking.

Ideally drop by office hours to ask in person, and gauge their enthusiasm. When you approach your recommender, bring (or attach if you have to ask in email) a copy of that excellent project/paper you did in their class. Remind them of who you are.

“I’m not sure if you’ll remember me, but I took your class aaaa in semester bbbb, and did my project on topic x. I usually sat in the third row on the left.” Hopefully this will elicit a response of “Of course I remember you! Nice to see you.” Or perhaps “Oh yes, forgive me for being slow to remember—your project was great.” Gauge the response of your potential
recommender. If they seem hesitant, consider asking someone else.

You also should use the occasion of asking for a reference to get advice. Ask your potential recommender: Do you think I’m a good fit for grad school in this field? What schools do you think I should apply to?

When someone has agreed to write you a letter, follow up with a thank you note, and make sure to send them all the information about where to send the letter promptly.

A few business days before the deadline, if they have not yet submitted the letter (which hopefully you can determine from the online application site), send them a polite reminder: “Thanks again for agreeing to write a letter for me! Just wanted to remind you that it’s due on <date>. Here’s the info on where to send it.”

After you hopefully get your acceptances, send a thank you note to your recommenders. You might ask their advice if you’re having a hard time deciding which program to attend. You might also ask if your recommender
could introduce you to faculty they know at your new institution.

**Amy Bruckman, PhD**

Professor of Interactive Computing

Georgia Institute of Technology

Students, when possible, should invite professors as references who have more than one opportunity to know them.

A reference letter from a professor from whom a student had taken only one course or only one term of undergraduate research would lack the credibility of a letter from a professor from whom the student had taken two or more courses or terms of undergraduate research.
It’s not enough to simply ask for a recommendation from a professor who
gave you an A in a course but knows little about you beyond that.

It needs to be someone who knows you well and can write in detail about
your qualifications. If you are interested in graduate school you need to
start early finding mentors who know you well.

In some cases it may be that the student is unsure about whether a
particular professor will write a strong letter of support.
Then it would be helpful to ask the faculty member if he or she would be “comfortable” writing a letter. This makes it easier for the professor to decline by saying, “I really don’t know you well enough,” rather than writing a lukewarm letter of support.

Professor Emeritus of Operations Research
Yale University

Letter writers should have some significant experience with you – that they can tell specifics about you. They should also have experience with many individuals at your level to give a fair comparison to.
Letter writers should reflect the whole person that you are – you can actively coordinate this.

Karen Feigh, PhD
Associate Professor of Aerospace Engineering
Georgia Institute of Technology

There are two typical mistakes I see students make. First, they don't choose the right person to write the letter, and second, they don't explain what they need the letter to say.

When you are entering graduate school, it's important that you are asking for recommendations from a professor who knows you well. This should be
someone you've worked closely with, taken several classes from, done research with, and perhaps assisted as a TA.

I get requests from students who took one class from me in their sophomore year and haven't seen me since. It's impossible for me to speak to their abilities and character - they are likely very different people as graduating seniors than they were as sophomores. If the person you are considering will have to look up your name to see if they even know you, choose someone else.

The second mistake I see students make is asking for a generic letter of reference. This sounds good in theory, particularly if you are applying to several graduate programs. However, a generic letter isn't going to illustrate how well you will fit within a particular program.

I usually respond to requests for letters by asking what the student would like me to emphasize. "Just say good things" is not helpful. However, "The program I'm interested in is focused on community outreach and grassroots leadership. Please emphasize my leadership roles in the PR
Campaigns and Contemporary Public Communication classes, and the
research project I worked on while assisting in the community outreach for
St. John's Medical System expansion in 2015" will get you a glowing letter
that will knock the socks off a graduate admissions committee.

Mary Frances Casper, PhD
Associate Professor of Communication
Boise State University

Lay the Foundation for an Effective Graduate School
Recommendation Letter by Intentionally Building Good
Relationships with Your Professors
My advice to students on gathering quality letters of recommendation is to do well in the class that the professor teaches and find opportunities during the semester to interact with the professor so s/he gets to know you personally before asking for a recommendation letter.

If possible, try to engage the professor in deep discussions about topics or issues covered in the course so s/he knows that you care about the subject matter and have learned from the course.

Additionally, volunteer to work as a research assistant on projects that the professor is conducting. This will provide opportunities for the professor to know about you in a work setting so s/he will have something special to say when writing the recommendation letter.

In sum, it takes time and effort on the part of the student to develop a substantive learning relationship with the professor in order to gather quality letters of recommendation.

Joe Cheng, PhD
Here is my advice to undergraduate students for getting good recommendation letters from professors for graduate school.

Try to interact with professors outside class, such as working on a research project with the professor.

I have interacted with many undergraduate students, who have worked with me on research projects under the undergraduate research fellow program at Boston College. Usually professors (including me) tend to write much better recommendation letters for students whose research capabilities they know something about.
So if they know that undergraduate (or even Masters students) working with them on research projects are conscientious and hard working, that tends to be mentioned in the recommendation letters.

I would not call this a mistake, but sometimes students simply ask professors who they took a course with and got a good grade to write a recommendation letter.

The letters from such professors (who have not had much interaction with the student outside class) tend to be good if the student did very well in the class, but such recommendation letters do not stand out. Of course, such letters are better than no letters, but I would suggest that students get letters from at least one or two letters from professors with whom they have had some more interaction outside class (other than simply taking a course with the professor and getting a good grade).

In summary, letters from professors who know more about the student and have interacted with the student while working on a research project tend
to stand out. I know this both a letter writer as well as a decision maker when admitting students for a doctoral program.

Such letters tend to be longer, more informative, and more useful to Ph.D. Program directors (for example) when making a decision on who to admit to duchess program.

In my Ling experience in working with graduate (doctoral students) who have gone on to become good professors, such recommendation letters tend to have predictive value for the students' careers even after graduate school!

**Tom Chemmanur, PhD**

Professor of Finance

Boston College
Some common mistakes I've seen students make:

- Waiting too long to ask for recommendations, so faculty are rushed
- Not providing clear and detailed instructions
- Asking for personal letters to be delivered to them (instead of an automated online system or anonymously to the school.)
- Selecting an inappropriate recommender, who didn't have a clear sense of their strengths or professional goals.

A recommendation:

Students should reach out to their instructors early on in a course, even just to introduce themselves. They should participate in class discussions, and even sitting toward the front and making eye contact with faculty goes
along way in helping us remember students, especially after decades of hundreds of them 😅

**Ira Greenberg, M.F.A.**

Chair, Division of Art & Professor of Drawing, Painting & Creative Computing

Southern Methodist University

A big issue for anyone seeking to go to a good grad school - either starting as a UG or with a MA is that the school wants letters from someone who clearly knows you and your abilities.

Unless students cultivate relationships - intellectually - with some professors, the letters they get will be too superficial.
Don’t Ask Your Favorite Professor for a Recommendation Letter – Ask the Best Potential Recommender

Biggest mistake: Asking your “favorite professor” or someone you feel most comfortable asking.

In requesting a graduate school recommendation you want to remember
that its purpose is to help the admissions committee assess your suitability for the program. Laying the groundwork for a strong recommendation letter requires advance planning and work on your part.

You may want to approach a potential recommender early in the process to take on a special project or otherwise engage with you so that they can get to know you in ways related to assessing your skills/qualities/attributes attractive in candidates for the program to which you are applying.

For example, if you were applying to a writing graduate program you want to work with a recommender who is able to develop a strong indication of your writing ability. The right recommender for one type of graduate program may be the wrong recommender for another type of graduate program.

Think about what the recommender is going to be asked (usually the recommendation forms will provide this information). Develop and tailor your interactions with the right recommender who can best assess the desired attributes.
The most persuasive letters to admissions committees are from recommenders who can best comment on your particular suitability for the program to which you are applying. Identifying this individual or individuals often requires work and may mean approaching someone not in your “comfort zone.”

Most recommenders want to help you achieve your goals. Help your recommender by making it easy for them to recommend you compellingly by working to give them insights to your skills that make you a great candidate to recommend.

Richard Willis, PhD
Associate Dean and Professor of Accounting
Vanderbilt University
It is important to select the appropriate recommenders for your application.

My advice is to contact the program’s admissions department to ask them specifically who they consider to be a strong recommender.

For example, if you are applying to graduate business school, such as an MBA, you will find that the admissions committee prefers to see recommendations from your current and past supervisors, or others that have observed you in your professional career. This is because work experience is highly valued in MBA admissions.

However, if you are applying to a program that does not consider work experience, an admissions advisor might suggest that you include
recommendations from professors who can speak to your academic ability. In all cases you would want to avoid recommendations from family members.

Bottom line: Find out directly from the admissions department what they prefer. Every program is different. Good luck!

**Pam Delany, MBA**

Director of Graduate Admission and Recruitment

W.P. Carey School of Business

Arizona State University
The Letter of Recommendation is required by most schools because it is the only “outside” source of information on the candidate as to how the person works with others, whether the person has shown initiative, etc.

The letter basically serves to confirm credentials, and may also add to what the candidate has told us in an essay.

We prefer to have a letter from the candidate’s direct supervisor, if they have worked for that person a reasonable amount of time. The direct supervisor can tell us how someone works in a team, how their communication is, how they have grown and progressed, and also what areas of improvement they see.

The best letters are those that give examples of achievements, not just a list of adjectives like “strong work ethic, good leadership, etc.” I usually advise candidates to sit down with their recommender and if possible, bring a past performance review to remind the person of what they have done.
Obviously, do not tell the recommender what to write (or write it for them), but a gentle reminder of areas of success or learning is helpful. And by all means, give them plenty of time to do a good job on your recommendation and get it to the school by the deadline.

It may help if the recommender knows something about the school you are applying to, but lacking that, they should at least know what you want to do in future. If you happen to know an alum of the school, they could either write a recommendation letter for you IF THEY KNOW YOU WELL, or they can just send an email to the admissions office to say they know you and think you will fit in to the culture.

As for the “title” of the recommender, that is not at all important. Getting a two-sentence letter from the CEO who clearly does not know anything about you is just a waste of paper. Usually letters from professors are equally uninformative unless you have worked on a long project with the professor. We don’t need them to comment on your academics because we have your transcript for that.
If you cannot ask your supervisor for fear of jeopardizing your job or potential promotion, then check with a former supervisor, a client, a vendor, or even someone outside of work who knows you and your work ethic well enough to paint a solid portrait of who you are.

**Christie St-John, Ph.D.**

Director of MBA Admissions

Vanderbilt University

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**Don’t Ask for a Letter of Recommendation at the Last Minute**
Avoid being late when asking for recommendation letters.

You must contact letter writers early so as to give them time to write a strong letter in support of your application. Students often forget that even when not teaching (say during summer) professors are busy with other professional work like research.

Contacting them at least 1 to 1 1/2 months ahead of deadline is always advisable. And feel free to send a gentle reminder 2 weeks before the deadline.

Gautam Thakur, PhD
Associate Professor of English
Boise State University
Don't ask for a letter at the last minute.

Even worse, do not list a referee before asking permission. The student should contact a professor well in advance of their deadline; if given a short time frame, the professor may not be able to write as carefully, or may even write less positively about the candidate.

Don't assume the professor remembers you.

Tell them who you are. Give your professor a list of your potential grad schools, and a current CV or resume. If time has passed, keep in touch with your references with occasional updates (1x / year?) on your a activities and/or career progress.
Unless the person is distant, avoid the quick email request. Offer to meet with the professor in person.

This may be obvious, but don't ask to see the letter. A reference may offer, but it should not be expected.

Of course, the student would contact those professors who know her/him well and presumably did well in their course of lab work.

**John Wehr, PhD**

Professor of Biological Sciences

Fordham University
Rather than list a mistake, I’ll offer a few pieces of advice regarding letters of recommendation.

**Give your reviewers enough time.** Writing recommendation letters can take quite a bit of time, and reviewers should be given plenty of it so they can fit your letter into their schedules. Try to provide at least a few weeks’ notice when asking someone to provide a letter of recommendation.

**Give your reviewers the detail they need.** Provide all of the specific details about the school and program to which you are applying, as well as other pertinent information such as where the letter should be submitted, to whom it should be addressed, deadlines that need to be met, etc.

Make the process as easy for your recommender as possible.

**Choose familiarity over fame.** Often students request letters from the most well-known faculty they can, even if they have had only limited contact with that person. It’s great to have a big name attached to your application, but if the recommender does not know you or your work well,
she will have a difficult time providing a letter that is useful to the selection committee.

When I review applications, I prefer letters that provide real insight into a student’s fit for a program – from a teaching assistant with whom a student has worked closely, for example – over more generalized, impersonal letters from more recognized names in the field.

**Todd Gannon**, PhD, AIA
Professor and Head of Architecture Section
Ohio State University

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**You Should Meet with the Person Writing the Recommendation Letter Ahead of Time**
The biggest mistake that students make when trying to get letters of recommendation for their graduate school application is that they don’t meet with the person writing the letter ahead of time.

Take the time to come meet with a professor or former boss to discuss your aspirations and interests related to graduate school. If an in-person meeting is not available, connect with the individual via email or Skype or some other means.

Taking the time to clarify your goals for graduate school and your future interests can help the person writing the recommendation letter tremendously.

The more information that a person has about you, the more detailed,
personalized, and supportive letter they can write because they can match
the skills and abilities they recognize in you with these goals and
expectations.

Sarah Clark, PhD
Associate Professor of Literacy Education
Brigham Young University

Don’t Be Unorganized When Requesting a Letter of
Recommendation for Grad School

Students often wait until the last minute to ask for a letter of
recommendation to a graduate program, which leaves faculty members
scant time to write a truly effective letter. In addition, students do not always provide information on the program to which they are applying and do not provide supplemental background information such as a copy of their CV, their interest in the program, their links to particular projects/faculty in the program, etc.

Prepared students are those that engage in a conversation with an advisor to understand first what programs are a good fit for their career objectives. Often faculty members have personal contacts in other programs and can provide background information or connections to current students/faculty members. It is also important to have a sense of why the student is interested in the program as then direct commentary can be given in the recommendation letter that supports the merits of the student’s application.

**Pamela Eddy, PhD**

Professor of Higher Education and Chair of Educational Policy, Planning, & Leadership

William & Mary
Students need to prepare before asking for a letter. Approach your professor with resume, etc. in hand.

Rebecca Harvey, MFA
Professor of Art
Ohio State University
1. Don’t be shy about sending reminders before they are due.

2. Always include your CV and also your essay(s) with your request for a letter.

3. If you were not directly supervised by the letter writer ask them if they can include input from your direct supervisor or mentor in their letter (like from their grad student).

4. Always include their admin staff cc’ed on the letter request and reminders.

5. Ask for an in person short meeting to talk before it is due if possible so they can recalibrate with you.

**Kerri Cahoy, PhD**

Associate Professor of Aeronautics and Astronautics

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
I can think of at least three basic (but frequent) mistakes that students make.

1. They wait until they are starting to apply to graduate school to start interacting with faculty. Often, the request for a letter of recommendation is the first email contact I have had with the student since they started taking my class (even if that was several semesters previously).

2. They cannot explain why they want to go to grad school, or why that program is a good match for them. “I like to learn,” or “It’s a well-known school” are often relevant reasons for picking an undergraduate institution, but grad school is much more about quality (and even individual advisors) in a particular specialty area.
3. They wait until the last minute and provide insufficient information to the faculty to allow a quality, personalized letter. In a number of cases, I know the graduate chair or relevant faculty at the university personally, and my letter of recommendation is a type of commitment of my own integrity and judgment. I don’t write mass-market “To whom it may concern” letters, and thus I am unwilling and unable to write 40-50 letters overnight on behalf of a student who hasn’t even told me what grade they got in my class.

**Barrett Caldwell, PhD**

Professor of Industrial Engineering & Professor of Aeronautics & Astronautics

Purdue University
Letters of recommendation are an essential component of the application requirements for graduate schools, yet their importance is often overlooked by the applicants.

The most common mistake students make when requesting letters is the lack of proper planning, including a failure to provide further support once acceptance from a potential recommender is received. It is also unfortunate that professors, the most common authors of letters, are busier than students might believe.

A strong, effective recommendation letter is best written by someone who meets a large set of criteria: ability to evaluate performance, professionalism, teamwork, leadership, and so forth. These requirements significantly narrow the list of suitable recommenders, and therefore early planning may prove essential for producing the most effective letters in a timely manner.

A formal letter request must be sent to potential writers at least two months before the deadline, not the typical two weeks or less! A short notice never
works well; even someone who knows the applicant well may not provide more than a generic, blunt letter, which will not impress an admission committee.

In a worse scenario, the potential author may decline writing the letter owing to the lack of time. In such a case, to make the quota, applicants may be forced to request letters from other professionals unfamiliar with their performance in a specific field or, even worse, from inappropriate sources.

In both cases, it is very likely the application will be rejected.

In the same line regarding planning, the applicants often think that their involvement in the process is finished as soon as the recommender accepts the task. Although the professor is writing the letter, the student must maintain a high level of involvement and communication during the process.
Providing a resume and transcripts is necessary but far from sufficient. An effective letter must be tailored to a particular program, and the recommender may do so contingent to sufficient time and information.

Communicating with the recommenders about the specific programs the student is applying for, the short and long term professional goals in mind, and the student’s scientific objectives may tremendously aid in writing an effective letter that stands out from the crowd. This cannot be done without planning ahead and selectively evaluating each potential recommender for the best outcome.

Daniel Folegea, PhD
Associate Professor of Physics and Biophysics
Boise State University

Only Ask Professors Who Have Something Meaningful to Say About You
Letters of recommendation are a key part of the advancement of any student along the path of higher education. Indeed, these letters become part of the fabric of one’s achievement, never to be erased.

Twenty-five years or older, about 32% of Americans have college degrees. Pretty high, to be sure. But only 11% have masters degrees, and of them, just 1.7% have earned a doctorate. That means that, at a minimum, graduate schools (and employers) are looking for that which distinguishes one applicant from another.

Several factors set one apart. There are two categories.

First are numerical indices. Those include GPA, which is not especially objective as it depends much on the undergraduate degree institutions
average GPA, which varies wildly. Another is standardized test scores like
the GRE, GMAT, LSAT, and such.

But the data shows that these only predict performance in the first year of
graduate school and have virtually no predictive ability regarding career
placement or performance. So, graduate schools need more than numbers.

Second is the application. There’s the letter penned by the applicant,
which needs to be laser-focused on the school and one’s intentions there.
Then the “resume,” which chronicles one’s many achievements to date. The
latter includes internships, special skills, extra-curricular activities, and the
like. But these are self-reported, and as such, subject to interpretation.

Third is the letter of recommendation. Such letters can come from
family or friends of family or other personal contacts. These are valuable
but are smothered with self-interest. Those coming from professors are all
together a different story. Professors have a unique stake; their reputations.
Thus, they take the request to file a letter with gravity. Understand that.
Here are three simple rules for requesting a letter.

1. Only ask professors who have something meaningful to say about you.

That is, professors that know you well enough to write a thoughtful recommendation. I can’t tell you how many times students that I barely remembered, if at all, have requested letters. When I looked at their exams and assignments, they were almost always strong students. But I’d had no real interactions or relationships with them.

I always say something to these students how the letter will be limited to course performance. The result is a stunted recommendation that likely doesn’t boost enrollment prospects.

2. Make it easy for the professor to write the letter.

Attach your application letter and any transmitting essays. Include a resume. Provide professors with the basic information they need to
compose a letter. Nothing is more annoying than having to ask students’ for materials they should have provided in the first place. We professors are busy; help us help you.

3. Most importantly, let professors know why you are applying.

Express your passion for pursuing a graduate degree. What do you want to do with the degree? How does this degree help you achieve your aspirations?

We really do want to know. The more we understand your motivations, the better we can craft the letter to reflect the fit between your intentions and your intended graduate studies.

Going to graduate school is a big decision. It involves considerable time, talent, and other resources. It is not a decision to be made lightly. However, once made, approach the entire process thoroughly and diligently.
Your letters of recommendation may very well be what determines the success of your application. Request them in a manner that maximizes your chances of having letters filed on your behalf that not just report your performance, but that heartily endorse your candidacy.

**James Bailey, PhD**

Professor of Management

George Washington University

Make sure the person you are asking can write a strong letter for you.

This is someone who was a course instructor for a course you performed well in or a professor you have done research with and have solid outcomes (e.g. poster presentation, article submitted to a journal as co-author).
I hate when students ask me to write a letter and I have to struggle to find something positive to say. It is hard for me to say you are a great student when you got a C in my course or you were a great research assistant but I don't have any tangible outcomes I can write about in the letter.

**Melody Goodman, PhD**

Associate Professor and Interim Chair of Biostatistics
New York University

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**Conclusion**

Getting high-quality letters of recommendation can make the difference between having an outstanding grad school application or one that gets lost in the stack.

How are you ensuring that your recommendation letters are fantastic?
What mistakes should you avoid when requesting a letter from a professor?

The faculty and staff who contributed to this article shared tons of practical...
and impactful tips for how you can get quality graduate school letters of recommendation.

If you are early in thinking about graduate school, then you learned how to build relationships with professors so that their letters of recommendation are specific, personal, and actually helpful to your application.

If you are currently working on your application, then you learned how to choose the right people to ask for a letter of recommendation, how to approach potential recommenders, and how to support them so that they write better recommendation letters.

Go try out some of their advice and let us know how it goes!

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