

A Student Guide to Obtaining Letters of Recommendation

Most graduate programs require three to five letters of recommendation. These letters directly and specifically should support your application for admission to professional or graduate school. They should focus upon those areas that directly pertain to your potential to succeed in a graduate program or within a profession. Professional schools typically require letters from faculty only, or faculty and professionals. Academic graduate programs typically require letters from faculty and researchers only. Be sure to check each school's or program's requirements to see who the letters should be from, and how many letters you will need to submit. In all cases, however, the letters should be from people who know you well and can write about your academic and/or professional strengths and accomplishments with detail and specificity.

Whom to Ask For Letters

- Professors/Faculty Advisors
- Current or previous employers
- University administrators/staff

Establishing Faculty Contact

Establish contact with your instructors early in your college career. A conscientious, deliberate attempt to know and be known by faculty members in your major field of study will bring about greater opportunities for obtaining substantive and specific letters of support for graduate or professional school admission. Letters of recommendation from faculty are more meaningful when based upon their personal knowledge of your abilities and performance as generated through a **mutual interest** or **shared academic or learning activity**. Some admissions committees also welcome letters from faculty in areas outside your major. There are a number of strategies for pursuing faculty contact, such as:

- **Course Selection** - Consider selecting courses with small class sizes to maximize personal contact with professors and enrolling in subsequent courses offered by the same professor. If qualified, apply for departmental honors or research programs (if available in your major) to establish closer relationships with faculty. Opt for essay exams or extra work whenever possible to draw attention to your writing, research and initiative. And, of course, maintain strong academic performance.
- **Independent Studies** - Independent study is typically initiated by upper division students and is based on a topic of interest to both student and professor. A professor may require topical readings and a laboratory or written project so that the experience qualifies for departmental credit. Such an experience will introduce students to research in fields of interest and provide the opportunity for substantial faculty contact.
- **Directed Group Studies** - Faculty contact also will result when students enroll in group studies courses in which several students are directed by a faculty member in a special project, usually of the professor's choosing, in laboratories, libraries or field sites.
- **Academic Internships/Volunteer Activities** - Students are responsible for finding internships or volunteer experiences related to their major or career goals. These experiences may or may not be well-supervised and guided by faculty. Try to choose those which include faculty participation so that you can maximize your chances for faculty contact and discussion.

- **Teaching and Research Assistantships** — Consider offering to become a teaching or research assistant for professors. Generally students have performed well in courses that they want to "TA." The possibility of becoming a research assistant normally depends upon faculty need for library or laboratory work by assistants, and/or upon available space in laboratories and adequate funding.

Establishing Contact with Professionals

Some professional school programs require or suggest letters of recommendation from professionals in that same field who can attest to the applicant's suitability, preparation and motivation for the profession, and who can comment on qualities which relate to the applicant's potential to succeed in professional school. These include: master's programs in business, social work, counseling, public policy and administration, physical therapy, public health, and international affairs; doctoral programs in law, dentistry, pharmacy, optometry, osteopathic, podiatric and veterinary medicine; and teaching credential programs. The **Career Center** lists paid jobs and internships both on and off campus on [Handshake](#).

Content of Good Letters of Recommendation

Be certain that your writers are aware of all of your accomplishments so they can discuss the work you did with them in the context of your whole record. Students can help in the construction of their letters by providing certain information to the people who will be writing the letters. Background information such as **transcripts, autobiographies, resumes, personal statements** and **research papers** can help faculty members or professionals write thorough and substantive letters. Provide such documentation for your writers whenever possible.