How to Request a Letter of Recommendation

Presented by Graduate Studies Center
What we will cover

- Who to ask
- When to ask
- Materials needed
- Do’s and Don’ts
- Resources available
Letters of Recommendation

A well written recommendation letter provides admissions committees with information that isn’t found elsewhere in the application.

A recommendation letter 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.

Most graduate programs ask for 3-6 letters
- 2 from professors
- 1 employer-ideally & depending on program
Who to Ask

The best letters are written by faculty who know you (preferably with “professor” title)
- From whom you have taken multiple classes
- Have completed substantial projects
- Have researched for
- Have received very positive evaluations
- Professors provide insight into your academic competencies and aptitude
  - personality characteristics that may contribute to your potential to succeed in graduate school

Employers
- Letters from employers are useful if you are working in a field that is related to that which you intend to study.
- Only one letter from an employer!
Who to Ask Cont’d

THE CRITERIA

▪ Knows your work
▪ Can describe your work positively
▪ Has a high opinion of you
▪ Be able to favorably compare you with your peers
▪ Be well known in the field
▪ Be able to write a positive letter
▪ Is able to evaluate your academic performance, discuss personal characteristics and capacity to work with others
▪ Can discuss skills and evaluate your level of professionalism
▪ Someone who has earned the degree which you are seeking
▪ Someone with an advanced degree who has supervised you in a job or internship aligned with the graduate program you are pursuing
▪ knows where you are applying
▪ knows your educational and career goals
Who to Ask Cont’d

Step-by-Step
- Take the time and make the effort to consider all of the possibilities:
  - Each professor you have had
  - All individuals you have come in contact with;
    - employers
    - internship supervisors
    - supervisors from volunteer settings
- Don’t rule out anyone, at first
- Just make a long list of possible recommenders
- After you have created an exhausted list, rule out those who you know will not give you a positive recommendation
- 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
Faculty are especially busy during the months of November and December or towards end of each term.

Be considerate of your letter writers’ time and approach them two months before you need the letter.

Ask AT LEAST 6-8 weeks before you need them

- Send friendly reminders 1-2 weeks before you need them
HOW TO GET A POSITIVE LETTER

- Make an effort to get to know your professors and supervisors
  - 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
  - Regularly attend office hours

- Provide your letter writer with ample information about you
Materials to Give to your Recommender

- **Cover Letter**
  - Thanking the professor for their time
  - 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 lists of schools/programs you are applying, due dates, with the earliest due date at the top
  - Highlighting salient details of your academic life
    - Which of my courses did you take, and when?
    - What grades did you receive in each class?
    - What is your overall GPA?
    - What is your GPA in your major field?
    - Did you take a minor, and if so, how will it enhance your graduate studies?

- **AMPLE information about yourself if writer doesn’t know you well**
Materials Cont’d

- Unofficial transcripts
- Evaluations
- Copy of your best work in the course (with instructor comments on it), lab evaluations, projects, etc.
- Copy of your resume
- Copy of Statement of Purpose or Personal Essay
- Stamped and addressed envelopes
- Professional Goals
A well-organized series of files, one for each graduate school where you will be applying with:

- Recommendation forms from the schools
  - To make it easy for you letter writer to complete forms in a timely manner, complete the following
  - Applicant information typed in
  - Recommenders name, title, contact information

- Catalogue descriptions, that make the school relevant to your professional and educational goals

- For each file dedicated to one of the schools where you're applying, make it clear how that graduate program differs from the others.

- More and more schools are requesting online recommendations.
  - Give the proper URL to your recommender

- Where to send the letter (cite individual names, titles, if you can), and what the deadline is (provide a soft deadline)
Some Tips

- Try to arrange it so that the letters compliment rather than merely echo one another.
  - Have one professor write about the quality of your research and term papers, and perhaps have him mention any study abroad experiences
  - Have another address your oral communication skills, leadership abilities, moral character and personality
  - Have a former internship supervisor talk about your work habits, the nature of your internship, your motivation, and what you contributed to the company or organization where you interned
  - You can have a bulleted list of the specific things you'd like a particular letter-writer to address, and add a request: “If you can, please discuss these topics in your letter.”

- Make sure your references fully understand your career goals and aim your letter writers towards that
Some Tips Cont’d

▪ Include a stamped self-addressed postcard with this message
▪ “Please mail this card to me when you receive this letter” and ask the professor to drop it in with the sealed application
▪ That way, you can track the letter, and you need to do that until you know that all your letters have landed in the right hands.

▪ Keep copies of admissions materials for your records
**Do’s**

- Arrange an appointment, explaining that you wish to discuss your plans to apply to graduate school.
  - This gives professor heads up and a chance to think about whether he or she can write a helpful letter on your behalf.
- Prepare
  - To discuss the type of degree you seek
  - Programs to which you applying
  - How you arrived at your choice
  - Goals for graduate study and future aspirations
  - Why you believe the faculty member is a good candidate to write a letter of your behalf
- Give the faculty enough time to write a glowing letter. Ask about 6 weeks before needed
- Send friendly reminders around 1 or 2 weeks before letter is needed.
- Give the professor what he or she needs to write the letter
Do’s

- Be neat
- Place all documentation in a folder and neatly label each item
- Clip each recommendation form to supporting documentation, relevant admissions essays, and a stamped envelope
- Use sticky note to mark the deadline on each
- Ask for input on your choices and overall advice.
- Pay attention to signals that faculty member does not want to write a letter on your behalf.
- Waive your rights
  - To read the letter
  - Up for debate
- Some graduate school selection committees may weigh lightly any non-restricted letters in your application
Don’ts

▪ Don’t ask for a recommendation letter by email.
▪ Don’t spring it on the faculty member.
▪ Don’t make the faculty rush as it will result in an average or even mediocre letter
  ▪ Ask weeks before
  ▪ Send maybe one or two friendly reminders a week or two before the deadline is helpful, but don’t rush the professor or offer multiple reminders
▪ Don’t fail to read a faculty member’s response to your request.
  ▪ After you ask a faculty member, carefully interpret his or her response.
  ▪ Often faculty provide subtle cues that indicate how supportive a letter they will write.
▪ Don’t push for a positive response.
  ▪ Sometimes a faculty member will decline your request for a letter of recommendation.
  ▪ Accept it! And move on
  ▪ He or she is doing a favor because the resulting letter would not help your application and may even harm it.
Don’ts

- Don’t wait until the last minute to ask for a letter
  > Faculty are very busy with teaching, work, and research. They advise students and likely are writing many letters for other students.
  > Give them enough notice so that they can take the time required to write a letter that will get you accepted into graduate school.
- Don’t have bad timing.
  > Approach a faculty member when they have the time to discuss it with you and consider it without time pressure.
  > Don’t ask immediately before or after class.
  > Don’t ask in a hallway

**INSTEAD**

- Visit the professor’s office hours
  > The times intended for interaction with students
  > Often helpful to send an email requesting an appointment and explaining the purpose of the meeting.
- Don’t provide messy, unorganized documents.
  > Anything you provide the professor must be free of errors and must be neat
### Don’ts

- **Don’t provide incomplete supporting documentation**
  - Don’t make a professor have to ask you for basic documentation (transcripts, resume etc.)

- **Don’t forget to write a thank you note or card afterward**
  - Your professor took the time to write for you, the least you can do is thank them
  - “I know you are busy so I appreciate that you took time to ...”
  - Maybe even provide a small gift of appreciation

- **Don’t forget to tell faculty about the status of your application**
Waiting for Graduate School

- You want the most updated letter of recommendation
- Ask if they can write a generic letter and if they are willing to keep a copy or willing to have you a copy (usb drive)
- Ask your professor if they are willing to update their letter
- Give the professor ample information about you when you ask them to update the letter
- Keep all work you’ve done for a class/project
If you have more questions please:

▪ Visit the Graduate Studies Center and Career Center websites
  www.csuci.edu/gsc
  www.csuci.edu/careerdevelopment/services/graduateschool

▪ Make an appointment with a Graduate Studies Center counselor for more information on
  graduate school.

▪ Meet with your professors
Follow us on Social Media!

- @CI.GSC
- CI_GSC
- CSUCI – Graduate Studies Center
- CI_GSC
Center Hours & Contact Information:

El Dorado Hall

Monday - Thursday: 9 a.m. - 9 p.m.
Friday: 9 a.m. - 4 p.m.
Saturday: 10 a.m. - 2 p.m.

Phone: (805) 437-3579
e-mail: gs.center@csuci.edu
www.csuci.edu/gsc