

# SEEKING RECOMMENDATION LETTERS FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

Students seeking recommendation letters for graduate school should (a) identify appropriate faculty members who will be able to write the strongest letters, (b) give their referees plenty of advance notice, and (c) provide referees with an organized, detailed packet of information that will streamline the process for the faculty member and result in a stronger letter for the applicant.

## **TIPS FOR IDENTIFYING GOOD REFEREES:**

- ❖ Approach professors who know you best (e.g., those you've conducted research with, taken several courses from, your academic advisor, or any professor who knows you well in or outside of class).
  - If you've only had one class with a professor and were very quiet and/or did not do well in the class, you should probably ask someone else (a neutral or short letter stands out in stark contrast to other rec letters, the vast majority of which are glowing).
- ❖ All else being equal, letters from psychology faculty weigh more than those from faculty in other departments or from jobs or internship experiences (unless highly relevant to your application, such as a clinically-related internship for a Ph.D. program in clinical psychology).
- ❖ Approach faculty members who think most highly of you.
  - If you have any doubts about whether a faculty member can write you a strong letter of recommendation, ask them; most will be honest in telling you either that they can or that they think they are not your best option and you should explore other possibilities.
- ❖ Always ask face-to-face; never email a request (or worse, never leave rec forms under an office door).

## **TIMELINE:**

- ❖ August-October: Work through multiple drafts of both your vita and personal statement (be sure to have an advisor or mentor edit/critique your drafts); I will look at drafts anytime before the Monday of Finals week.
- ❖ 4 to 6 weeks before the 1st letter is due (typically Mid-Oct): Approach faculty members to ask if they would be willing to write you a letter (note that their first hint that they are writing you a letter should NOT be an email from a school requesting an online reference letter from them on your behalf).
- ❖ 2-3 weeks before 1st deadline, but NO LATER THAN THE MONDAY OF FINALS WEEK: give each faculty referee an organized packet containing all the materials they will need to write you a strong reference letter.

## **WHAT TO GIVE YOUR FACULTY REFEREES:**

1. Your vita/academic resume (see "Research in Social Psych" webpage on Segue for examples)
  2. Your personal statement (your final, polished version, not an early draft; see Segue examples and handout)
  3. A cover page/checklist for the faculty member that contains a list (in chronological order by due date) of all the programs to which you are applying, including the type of program, the deadline, whether there is a printed rec form, no form, or an online form, the address, and any special information the faculty member might want to incorporate into their letter (e.g., your interests in that particular program)
  4. Stamped, self-addressed envelopes for each letter that needs to be mailed back to you; for letters that go directly to schools, we'll use an SU envelope. Note that for both mailed forms and online recommendations, you should fill out the faculty referee's information and you MUST sign the waiver to make the letter confidential. IMPORTANT: DO NOT SIMPLY EMAIL A WEBSITE FOR YOUR REFEREE TO WADE THROUGH; FIND, PRINT, FILL OUT, AND SIGN ALL FORMS AND INCLUDE THEM IN YOUR PACKET.
  5. Supplemental information that will help the faculty member write you a strong letter (e.g., your GRE scores; courses you have taken from them, including semester, year, and grade for each course; your future goals and plans; your strengths in general or for a particular program). Also feel free to ask a referee to help explain away a limitation in your application, such as low GRE scores or low grades before you got interested in psychology (i.e., and "found your true calling").
- ❖ All of the above should be well-organized, bundled, and clearly labeled in ONE folder or binder.
    - It is much easier for the faculty member if you give them one packet that contains everything all at once rather than to keep dropping off additional materials, which are hard to keep track of.]