

SEEKING RECOMMENDATION LETTERS FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

Students seeking recommendation letters should (a) identify faculty members who will be able to write the strongest letters, (b) give their referees plenty of advance notice, and (c) provide a SINGLE organized, detailed information email (or packet) 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 quiet and/or did not do well, you should ask someone else (a neutral or short letter will be obvious and weak by comparison to most letters, which are glowing; this will hurt your case).
- ❖ 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 ("Would you be able to write me a *strong* recommendation?"); most will be honest in telling you they can or that you should explore other possibilities.
- ❖ Always ASK faculty members for a letter in advance (preferably face-to-face, but email is okay IF you already graduated and live out of town); NEVER leave rec forms under an office door before you ask, or worse, let a faculty member receive an email request from a school before you've asked the professor—it's presumptuous and makes a bad impression (something you don't want to do with a letter writer!!)
- ❖ ALWAYS **waive** your right to see the letters (they are more credible). I won't write letters without this.

TIMELINE: (FOR PH.D PSYCH PROGRAMS; FOR OTHER PROGRAMS, WORK BACKWARD FROM THE DUE DATE)

- ❖ Summer: Take the GRE in summer if at all possible—you will need the Fall to research schools (and your score will greatly influence the pool of schools you should apply to); also, professors need to know your score to help you narrow down your schools list and to write your letter. If you don't take the GRE in the summer, take it as early as possible in the Fall (e.g., September or October at the absolute latest).
- ❖ August-October: Research schools (look at department websites to see faculty you'd want to work with and/or read research in your areas of interest to find faculty matches) and come up with a list that includes "reach schools", "just right schools", and "safety schools" (check these with a mentor or advisor). During this same time period, work through multiple drafts of both your vita and personal statement (be sure to have an advisor or mentor edit/critique your drafts). Ask Dr. G to share her Google drive folder with you, which contains handouts and examples.
- ❖ 5-6 weeks (typically Mid-Oct) before the 1st letter is due: 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).
- ❖ Plan to finish your apps not right before the deadline, but 2-3 weeks before. Why? Because professors (who are often writing letters for numerous students) need 2-3 weeks lead time to write their letters. Note that you should NOT count the week of Thanksgiving, when faculty may be out of town or spending time with their families.
- ❖ 2-3 weeks before the first deadline (not including Thanksgiving week), but **NO LATER NOV 4th for a DEC 1st deadline**: send each faculty referee a single organized email containing ALL the materials (see below) they will need to write you a strong reference letter.
 - In your request for online references at each school, be sure to fill out *completely* the information about the letter writer, including title (e.g., Professor of Psychology), university, address, and phone number. (Look these up if you don't know them.)
 - **IMPORTANT**: Fill out your online rec requests (which generate automatic emails to faculty) ALL AT ONE TIME, sometime after you ask for the reference but no later than the day you give them all your materials; it's difficult for a busy faculty member (who may be writing 10 recs for 7 different students) to have to submit new rec letters every few days; it is much easier for the professor to send them all at once.
 - Note that failure to (a) give enough advance notice, (b) completely fill out the forms, or (c) send online requests all at once can result in extra hassle for the faculty member and creates a poor impression on you, so plan (and manage your time) accordingly.

WHAT TO GIVE YOUR FACULTY REFEREES:

1. Your vita/academic resume (see Dr. G's Google Drive for examples)
 2. Your personal statement (a polished version, not an early draft; see Google drive for examples and a handout about personal statements)
 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 an online form, no form, or a printed rec 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. [If references are not online: include stamped, self-addressed envelopes. Note that for both mailed forms and online recommendations, you should fill out ALL of the faculty referee's information and **you MUST sign the waiver to make the letter confidential.**]
 5. Supplemental information that will help the faculty member write a strong letter (e.g., GRE scores and percentiles, psych & overall GPA; courses you took from the prof, including semester, year, and grade for each; your future goals and plans; strengths you would like the letter writer to emphasize). 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 either be in (a) ONE email or (b) ONE well-organized, bundled, and labeled folder
 - It is much easier for the faculty member if you give them ONE email or ONE packet that contains everything all at once rather than to keep dropping off or emailing additional materials, which are hard to keep track of.