How to get STRONG Letters of Recommendation
Psychology Department IPFW

Letters of recommendation are extremely important to graduate admissions committees. A good letter can truly help you. Conversely, a weak or even a lukewarm letter can hurt you. The most important letters come from professors who have had a good amount of contact with you – especially outside of the classroom, such as a clinic setting or research lab. A professor who submits a letter stating that she or he can’t quite recall this particular student (you!) - but thinks you are probably competent because you earned a decent grade in the course --- can be problematic - in that it suggests that you are not “noteworthy” at the least. Be sure and ask each referee if they can write a strong letter about you.

The best letters come from professors who have been involved with your professional development. A faculty member, who has supervised research, watched you in a field experience course or worked with you as an undergraduate teaching assistant can share a unique perspective. Perhaps a professor has assisted you in your role as an officer in the Psychology Club or in Psi Chi, or another campus organization. The “take home” message of this paragraph should be that one needs to be active in the discipline or field of psychology in order to get a very good letter of recommendation.

Students should be cautious about getting letters from employers – unless they are in the field of psychology. Letters from celebrities or public officials should be avoided and might also yield a negative reaction from your potential future professors. Similarly, letters from your doctor, neighbor, relative, family friend, priest, rabbi ----- or therapist should strongly be avoided. Even though you may have made a lot of progress in treatment this should not be part of your dossier.

Keep in mind that your professors are busy. You should ask your professors if they are willing to write you a letter of recommendation well in advance of the actual deadline for submission of your application. After your professors have agreed to write you a letter of recommendation you should carefully assemble a resume of your materials – highlighting your experience with each referee you are asking for support. The best thing you can do to help with your letter is to provide the writer with useful information about you. You should include any classes you have taken with the professor and when you took them. You should let your professor know about any notable achievements or awards you might have received. You might also include any notable papers or assignments that you completed that your referee could comment on. A copy of your personal statement that you are sending to each graduate/professional program can be extremely helpful to the faculty person you have chosen to support your application. It is also important to include a list of the programs you are applying to, the degree which you are seeking, and the deadline for when the application must be received. We recommend that you get all paperwork (at one time) about a month ahead of the deadline for the letters of reference. Be organized and include addressed envelopes and postage as necessary for each letter of support.
Be very careful with any forms to be given to referees. Most will need to be signed indicating you waive or do not waive your rights to inspect the contents of the referees letter. Think about the message sent to the evaluation committee (and your letter writer) if you decide not to waive your right to inspect this letter. Generally, it is suggested to waive your right to inspect the letter of recommendation. Committees will expect a more honest assessment of your potential if they know the referee expects the contents of the letter to remain confidential.

List of things to do:

1) Well in advance of the deadline for you applications talk to the professors you wish to have write you a recommendation letter. This will allow you to know who is willing to write you a letter, and it will notify your professors so that they can be looking for your materials and setting aside time to work on writing your letter.

2) Assemble a resume of your materials.
   • Include experiences you have had with the professor (lab work, clinical work, etc.).
   • Include classes you have taken with the professor, when you took the classes, and the grades you received.
   • Include notable achievements and awards.
   • Include any writing samples that your referee could comment on.
   • Include a copy of your personal statement.
   • Include a copy of your academic transcript.
   • Include a list of programs to which you are applying and the degree sought.
   • Include a list of deadlines for receipt of applications for each program to which you are applying.
   • Include the application forms. Make sure you fill out all of the portions of the forms that you are responsible for filling out. Also make sure that you carefully decide whether or not you wish to waive your right to inspect the contents of the recommendation letter (see discussion about waiving your rights to view your recommendation above).
   • Include envelopes that have been stamped and addressed.

3) Get all of the above materials to your professors at least 1 month in advance of the time at which you wish them to submit your recommendation.

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