

How to Get Good Letters of Recommendation

For the single best thing you can do, to get a good letter of recommendation, click [here](#).

Most of the materials you submit for the evaluation of your application to a graduate program are objective and quantitative: grade-point average, Graduate Record Exam scores, class standing, and so forth. Letters of recommendation are the important exception; they should mention all your positive qualities not revealed by objective data such as GRE scores. A substantive letter from an informed referee can often be very persuasive to graduate admissions committees, especially in "borderline" admissions decisions.

Letters of recommendation may touch on the following points of potential interest to graduate admissions committees:

- How good are your research skills (of great interest to most graduate programs)?
- Do you offer thoughtful contributions to class discussions?
- Do you have good interpersonal skills that enable you to get along with faculty and other students?
- Do you exhibit strong leadership skills?
- Have you contributed to the various extracurricular activities of the Department such as Psi Chi and the Psychology Club?

By mentioning subjects like these, letters of recommendation can provide the "big picture" of your overall promise and potential, something not necessarily revealed by test scores, but every bit as important for predicting success in a graduate program. Admissions committees know this, and they read letters carefully.

Letters of recommendation play an especially important role if there is some anomalous or seemingly contradictory aspect of your application. For example, consider a student whose financial or family problems had an adverse impact on academic performance during a particular year. A letter-writer can offer an explanation that prevents this from being held against the student.

Most schools ask you to provide three letters of recommendation. Naturally, you should get letters from faculty who know you best. A bland or neutral letter, from somebody who knows you only as a name on a class roll, can hurt more than it helps.

Good prospects for good letters are your advisor and those faculty teaching the smaller, intensive courses required of all majors such as Statistics and Research Methods (your grades in which graduate schools review especially carefully).

Other helpful letters could be provided by faculty with whom you have done Directed Research, those from whom you have taken several courses, or faculty with whom you have an affinity and who know you well. Ideally, your referees (letter-writers) are your advocates for admission. However, their advocacy can be only as effective as their knowledge about you.

The single best thing you can do, to get a good letter of recommendation--particularly if a teacher does not have a long acquaintance with you--is to **provide your letter writer with useful information**. Here is the type of information letter writers often find helpful:

- your overall GPA
- a list of psychology courses you have taken, and grades earned
- your minor if you have one
- the titles and abstracts of any research papers you have written
- honor societies to which you belong
- awards that you have won
- activities in which you have participated (and any offices held)
- work experience
- service activities such as volunteer work
- a description of your professional goals

With this information, you can help your referees make their best possible case for you, to help you attain employment or admission to graduate school.

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Lloyd, M. A. & Dewey, R. A. (1997, July 16). How to get good letters of recommendation. [Online]. Available: <http://www.psywww.com/careers/lettrec.htm>.