

## REQUESTING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

One of the greatest areas of confusion and miscommunication among students applying to graduate school involves letters of recommendation. Students are often hesitant to approach faculty to ask for letters. Writing letters of recommendation is part of a faculty member's job and they expect to write letters for the good students in their classes. Do not ever hesitate to ask for a letter or recommendation because you feel you will be imposing. In the process of deciding whom to ask and how to ask, students often procrastinate--making it more difficult to find willing faculty members to write letters on short notice.

What follows are suggestions (based on faculty comments) which may prove helpful to students in the process of seeking letters of recommendation:

### **Whom should you ask for a letter of recommendation?**

Normally graduate schools are interested in receiving letters describing a student's academic ability. Thus, you should ask faculty members who can comment on your performance in an academic setting. Generally you would want to ask faculty in classes where you have made the best grades. Even if other faculty know you well, an instructor of a course where you earned a C might not be able to write a very strong letter. If possible, you should strive for letters that stress different areas of strength, e.g., one letter that emphasizes computer skills, another your research skills. That way letters won't be duplicates of each other. Asking the faculty advisor or someone who has known you **only** in an informal setting, such as a fieldwork class or student organization, may bring a refusal because most faculty know that you need letters from professors in your key courses. If you wish to have an employer (from a psychologically relevant job) or a fieldwork supervisor write a letter for you, consider using him or her as an extra reference unless the school requests a letter from someone who knows you as a volunteer/fieldwork student or employee. The minimum number of letters requested by a school should come, if at all possible, from your academic instructors. **Never have a relative, family friend, or minister write a letter** for you unless specifically instructed to do so by a school to which you are applying.

### **How do I get to know faculty?**

At a large school like CSULB and in a large department like psychology, it is often hard to get to know faculty. It is up to the student to make a special effort. Taking more than one class from the same professor is a good idea. Participating in class discussion is helpful, but make sure the professor knows your name. To accomplish this you might talk to the professor before or after class or stop by the office hours. However, be sensitive to cues from the professor; don't interrupt the professor just as he or she is about to begin lecture or engage in a lengthy conversation after class if other students are also waiting. The ideal way to get to know faculty is to volunteer to work on research or special projects. Do not wait until your senior year to think about graduate school. If possible begin your planning in your sophomore or junior year.

## **How do you approach a faculty member to ask for a letter of recommendation?**

Hopefully you will have had a chance to know at least one or two faculty members well enough (work on the faculty research project, involvement in several small classes, etc.) that asking for a letter is a comfortable process. However, that is not the case for all students. Some may find that faculty members who they know best are part-time faculty who are not around when they need letters or the full-time faculty they know are on sabbatical or have retired. Thus, they will be in the awkward position of having to ask a faculty member whom they do not know well to write a letter. Approach the faculty member by explaining your situation and inquiring whether he or she knows you well enough to write a helpful letter. Listen carefully to the response. If the faculty member seems reluctant, you might want to consider asking someone else.

**Always ask the faculty member in person.** Do not leave a pack of letters in the faculty member's mailbox and expect him or her to willingly write the letters. If you cannot appear personally, at least phone to find out if the faculty member is willing.

## **Should I waive my right to see the letters?**

The Buckley Amendment grants students rights to have access to their educational records including letters of recommendation. However, recommendation forms ask students if they wish to waive their right to see the letters of recommendation. Most authorities advise students to waive their rights because the recipients will then know that the information in the letters is more candid. Information, contained in letters where the student does not waive the right of access, may be discounted by the schools who receive it. Also, many students do not realize that they only have the right to see their records if they are accepted by a school and enroll.

## **Give faculty members enough time to write the letters.**

Many students delay in completing their application forms and postpone the process until a vacation period. As many letters are due near the beginning of the year, students often complete their applications over the winter break. As they begin to organize their applications they approach faculty near the end of the fall semester. **Do not assume that faculty members will enjoy spending their winter vacation writing your letters.** Instead approach faculty at least six weeks before your first letter is due, so that they may write the letters at their convenience. Some faculty members would appreciate it if you would leave a reminder message on voice mail several days before the deadline. Ask the faculty member if he or she would like you to do that.

Also, you will want to approach faculty early enough that, if they are not able to write a good letter for you, you can still ask other faculty members.

## **Make the process of writing the letters as easy as you can.**

Faculty members may see up to 300 students a semester. Hence they may not remember the details of your experiences in their classes as well as you do. Provide a resume describing which classes you took from the faculty member in question, your

grades, the topics of any papers you wrote, and any other noteworthy events related to the class in which you participated.

Even if you received an outstanding grade in the class, the faculty member may know little else about you other than the small sample of behavior observed during the class. To provide the most informative, well-rounded letter, many faculty would like additional information about you. You may want to provide a resume which includes:

- a) your overall GPA and Psychology GPA
- b) your GRE scores (if available)
- c) a list of psychology (and other relevant) classes you have taken including your grades in each
- d) a statement of your goals. If you have different programmatic goals for different schools to which you are applying, be sure to inform the faculty member of that fact.
- e) your work and volunteer experience (if any)
- f) your accomplishments in research (if any)
- g) your participation in psychology-related extracurricular activities or other noteworthy activities, i.e. student government (if any)
- h) a list of any honors you have received or expect to receive
- i) an explanation about any area in which you consider yourself weak, or any other information you consider helpful

You may want to approach the faculty member shortly before the deadline to see if the professor needs any additional information. (This will also serve to jog the memory in case the professor has set the letters aside.)

### **Is there anything else I should do to make letter writing easy for the professor?**

Writing letters of recommendation is a time consuming process. Just filling in the information on the recommendation forms (name, title, school, address, phone, date, etc. --all but faculty signature) may take up to several hours if a student is applying to a large number of schools. A student who fills in the blanks for the faculty member may find his or her thoughtfulness results in a better letter from a faculty member who appreciates the student's organizational ability. *When requesting the letters, you might ask each faculty member how he prefers to be listed on the recommendation forms.*

**Arrange the letters in a systematic way. Provide a cover sheet with the name of the school, the program desired, and the date the letter is due.**

**Do not expect the faculty member to spend his/her own money or the department's money to provide envelopes and stamps.**

In the packet you give to the faculty members writing your letters, include envelopes that are addressed and include the return address of the faculty member. Make sure that you put enough postage on the envelopes. **Type whenever possible.**

**Additional tips:**

1) Most faculty members prefer to send the letters directly to the school. Do not ask the letter writer to return the letters to you unless the institution specifically requests that procedure.

2) Since the letter writers invest a lot of time and energy in writing the letters and hope that you will be successful, they would like to know the outcome. **As a courtesy, please inform those who wrote letters for you whether you were admitted to graduate programs and which ones. The undergraduate and graduate advising offices would also like to know about successful applicants.**