

How to Obtain Letters of Recommendation from Faculty for Graduate School

Who to Ask

Ask instructors with whom you have had a strong and positive relationship. Generally, you will need three letters of recommendation. Because the strongest letters provide long and detailed descriptions of your qualifications, you'll want to ask instructors with whom you have built up relationships. Instructors with whom you've taken more than one course, consulted during office hours, met with for advising will be able to provide a much stronger letter than someone who can only comment on the "A" you received in his/her class; working with a faculty member as his/her research or teaching assistant or working as an intern is an excellent way to build the basis for a strong letter.

When to Ask

If possible, give your letter writers one month prior to the deadline to write your letter. Two weeks notice is sometimes reasonable, but any time less than that becomes a hardship for your letter writer. If you wish to obtain a letter down the road from someone who is leaving the institution (e.g., retiring or moving), or if you are leaving the institution (e.g., graduating or moving), ask the potential recommender if he/she will write you a letter when you are ready to apply for graduate school. Also ask about a letter if you plan to take time off between undergrad and graduate school. Whatever the circumstance may be, stay in contact with the recommender during the interim.

How to Ask

Make an appointment with the faculty member (be sure remind him/her which class(es) and semester(s) you had him/her as an instructor). During the meeting, describe what your educational/career goals are and ask if the person feels that he/she could write a positive letter of recommendation for you to graduate programs that will help you reach your goals.

If a faculty member does not know you well enough or cannot write a positive letter, the faculty member will probably tell you so and may decline to write you a letter. If the individual is willing to write a letter, then you must do all you can to help your letter writer prepare a strong recommendation. Remember you are probably not the only person for whom the instructor is writing a letter, so you want to provide your letter writer with a package of information that is organized and complete.

What to Provide the Letter Writer

Information about you as a student at MSU Denver

- List the classes and semesters for which you have had the letter writer as an instructor
 - Include copies of papers you may have written or other notable assignments to help the letter writer have specific examples of your work
- Your transcripts (unofficial transcripts are usually fine)
- Vitae/Resume
- Anything else that you think might help the letter writer remember what a fantastic student you are.
- If you have them, your GRE scores (or scores from other relevant standardized tests)
- Your contact information, in case the letter writer has any questions

Information about your Educational/Career Goals

- A brief statement describing the kinds of graduate programs to which you are applying and where you hope the graduate degree will take you in terms of a career
- If you have it, a copy of your graduate school admissions essay (hint: letter writers can often provide excellent feedback on your admissions essay—be sure to ask for it)

Information about the program(s) to which you are applying

- A master list that contains the following information for each school to which you are applying:
 - The name of the school and the specific name and degree program to which you are applying (e.g., the University of Denver, Clinical Psychology, Ph. D.); note any special program focus or concentration area
 - To whom the letter should be addressed
 - The deadline for receipt of the letter of recommendation. Highlight the due date for the letter with the earliest deadline
 - Indicate whether the school provides a form for the recommender (if there is a form, provide the form to your recommender—be sure to complete the portions marked “applicant”)
 - Indicate whether you’ve waived your right to see the letter
 - You will have the option to waive or retain your rights to see the letter. Most letter writers are more comfortable if you waive your rights to see the letter. Admissions committees often place more value on letters when applicants waive their rights to see the letter so it is generally advisable to select this option.
 - Where the letter writer should send the letter—some go directly to the schools via US mail, some go back to the applicant in a sealed, signed envelope, and some are emailed

A Few Final Thoughts

It is perfectly fine (and advisable) for you to give your letter writer a reminder about the letter, one week before the first deadline—but don’t make a pest of yourself. Furthermore, after all of your applications are complete and turned in, it is a nice gesture to write a thank you note to your letter writers. Also, please keep your letter writers informed about the outcome of your applications. The faculty who have agreed to write your letters are truly interested in helping you achieve your goals. If you are accepted to graduate programs, your letter writers want to celebrate and congratulate you; in addition, they can often help you choose between acceptance offers. If you weren’t successful in getting admitted this round, your letter writers can help you deal with the disappointment and figure out your next steps (yes, there are many different strategies for progressing toward your career goals even in the face of graduate school rejections).