

HOW TO ASK A PROFESSOR FOR LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Department of Psychology, The College of Wooster

The professors in the Psychology Department are sincerely interested in helping you advance your career. One of the ways we can do that is by writing accurate and persuasive letters of recommendation for employment and graduate school. We can help you best if you help us by providing useful information in a timely way. Few students have any experience in asking for letters of recommendation and they are likely to have trouble putting themselves in the shoes of their professors. The purpose of this guide is to help you ask for letters in ways that will maximize the quality of the letters that are sent and reduce any frustration or misunderstanding in the process. Please note that some faculty members may have their own set of instructions or guidelines in addition to, or slightly different from, this document.

There are four components to asking for letters of recommendation: [Who you ask](#), [When you ask them](#), [What you need to give them](#), and [How you can be proactive](#). Each of these is discussed in turn.

Who should write letters?

The more knowledgeable your recommender is of you academically, personally and in a research sense, the better their letter will support your application. Therefore, you should not ask a faculty member that you know from only one class, especially if it was a large class, to write a letter for you. They simply will not have enough information about you. Of course, if you know the faculty member in other settings or have talked with them about your future plans in addition to this one class, then it may be appropriate for them to write a letter. It would be best, however, to ask a faculty member:

- with whom you have had multiple classes
- with whom you have had small classes
- with whom you have had writing intensive classes
- who you have worked with as a research assistant

But you should also bear in mind that you want them to say good things about you, so if you performed poorly in your academic or research pursuits under that faculty member, even if you had them for several of classes, they may not write a very strong letter of support or might not be willing to write a letter at all.

When should you contact those faculty members?

First contact the professor(s) at least two months prior to the need for your first letter. E-mailing this request is fine. If it has been some years or even several semesters, remind the professor of who you are and in what context you knew the professor. Briefly explain the nature of your request--- a letter for employment, internship, graduate school--- and the timeline you are working on. Ask if the professor feels comfortable writing a letter, and remember that faculty members can say no for a variety of reasons.

After determining that the answer is "yes, I will write a letter" provide the professor with a packet of information no later than six weeks prior to the first letter's deadline. It is unfair to ask a person to write letters (especially more than one or two) with virtually no time to do it. This is especially a problem when some letters are due at schools on December 15 and professors have finals to write and grade in a two-week flurry of activity just prior to that date.

What should you give to each recommender?

1. The courses you took with the professor and the semester and year in which they occurred, as well as the grade you received in the course. Similarly indicate the semester and year in which you were supervised for research or internships.
2. Provide an up-to-date transcript of your work at CoW (and any other college you may have attended), a calculated Psychology GPA and any GRE, LSAT, MCAT or other standardized test score you have obtained.
3. A resume that includes:
 - Your educational and job history
 - Any honors, including memberships in honor groups and societies
 - Any grants, fellowships or scholarships received
 - Any group memberships or offices held
 - All research activities (on or off CoW campus)
 - Any publications or public talks or presentations of a professional nature
 - All internships, externships or volunteer activities
 - Any extra-curricular activities or athletic participation

If certain activities are relevant to your proposed employment or graduate work, circle these so it is easy for the recommender to know what links they should make. If you have not worked with [APEX](#) on resume writing, this is a good time to set up an appointment. Your resume should outline skills, abilities and competencies you have gained from each of your positions; it should not simply be a chronological list of positions held.

3. If you have been in the workforce for some time, detail the responsibilities your work entailed. Indicate how your work experiences contribute to your desire for new employment or graduate work.
4. A copy of the [personal statement](#) that you are sending to the graduate programs describing your aspirations and why you are a good prospect for graduate school success. For job referrals, provide a copy of the cover letter you will include for a job search. If the schools or positions are vastly different you should include separate letters for each; if, instead, they are fairly similar and each letter will only have minor differences, then just include one. There is a link to a great article outlining how to prepare your personal statement on our website, please read it. As a brief summary this [statement](#) should include:
 - The nature of your interest in psychology and the areas that interest you
 - Your immediate goals and objectives
 - Your long-term career goals and objectives
 - Your personal and educational strengths and weaknesses
 - Anything else that you feel is relevant

You should have researched why you want to enter the graduate field or job you are requesting a recommendation for and how it is a good fit for you and/or your career path. You should also research why you want to attend each school to which you are interested in applying. A part of that research

could be the name of one or two faculty members whose research or clinical work is a good fit with your own interests.

5. A list of the schools to which you are applying and their deadlines.

6. Many schools are moving toward online admissions forms and letters of recommendation, so please use the following guidelines that are appropriate for the format of the letters you are requesting. For each school you should include the following information:

- the deadline when the letter must be completed
- the complete address for the graduate admissions office, regardless of whether the letter is sent to the school or the candidate (all letters of recommendation need an inside address)
- a brief explanation of why you want to attend the school (leave out such reasons as geography, the location of a boy/girlfriend, and other reasons that the recommender will never put into a letter)
- the name(s) of one or two faculty in the department and their research/clinical interests if inclusion of that information is relevant and will strengthen your application (though this is not required)
- whether the letter is to be sent directly to the candidate (and signature put on the seal of the envelope), sent to the school or completed online

If the school requires a physical letter:

- the school's letter of recommendation form with all required sections completed by the student (if included). You must sign indicating either that you waive your right to see the letter (the generally accepted approach) or that you do not waive this right. Keep in mind that many professors will not complete the form or write a letter of recommendation if you have not waived your right to see the letter.
- a Word document with all of the full addresses for mailing emailed to the recommender for inclusion in the inside address and also so that your recommender can print out professional College of Wooster envelopes for your letters

If the recommendation takes place online:

- complete all required and pertinent areas that you can online before placing the request with a faculty member
- a Word document with all of the full addresses for mailing emailed to the recommender for inclusion in the inside address

7. Please recognize that once we write a letter for you, we often would like to print, upload or email all of them at the same time. That way we can be sure we have completed the whole packet for you and not have to worry about coming back to it at a later time, when time might be more difficult to find. So, you should have all of your application materials in order and submitted for all programs by the first program's due date.

How can you be proactive?

1. Go to [APEX](#) NOW – they can help you identify schools, plan for GRE (or other) testing, work with you on your resume, personal statement or cover letter writing and help you get organized.
2. You should draw up a chart listing all of your schools, the letter writers, and the deadlines. It is okay to remind or gently ask professors if they have gotten your letter written and sent if the deadline is within one week. As the letters go out, you should check off each school.
3. Do enough advance research so that the packet of schools is the final list of schools to which you are applying instead of feeding the deadlines to the faculty member one-by-one.
4. *Please let the professors know whether or not you received an offer to graduate school(s) or got the job to which you were applying.*

We wish you success in your search for an appropriate job or graduate program!

**Last updated on 05/20/2013 by AJS and AG