

Obtaining Strong Letters of Recommendation*

Belmont University Department of Psychology

Letters of recommendation are one of the top criteria for gaining admission to graduate programs in psychology, along with a good GPA and GRE scores. During your time as a psychology major at Belmont, you should work to cultivate STRONG letters from your faculty. Faculty are not required to write letters for students; someone you approach to write a letter should WANT to write you a strong letter. In a nutshell, you should demonstrate to faculty that you are hard working, dependable, responsible, interested in psychology, organized, a good problem solver, emotionally mature, willing to work at being a good writer and public speaker, independent and a team player. The remainder of this handout gives more detailed information on this very important topic.

Characteristics to be Evaluated in a Letter of Recommendation

Both prospective employers and graduate schools are interested in evaluations that address specific characteristics that are likely to make you a successful employee or graduate student. They will either ask the recommender to evaluate you with respect to these characteristics in a letter or provide a check list of characteristics on which you are to be rated. There is often a great deal of overlap between the characteristics of interest to employers and graduate schools. Some of the most common characteristics to be evaluated include:

- Technical skills
- Orderliness and clerical skills
- Investigative skills
- Independence and initiative
- Originality/creativity
- Academic skills and performance
- Social skills
- General knowledge
- Leadership skills
- Oral expression skills
- Persuasive skills
- Written expression skills
- Desire to achieve
- Emotional maturity
- Carefulness in work
- Problem solving skills
- Potential for success
- Ability to work with others
- Organization Flexibility

Faculty members must be truthful in their evaluation of your abilities and potential. They will make every attempt to make factual statements that are supported by specific examples of your behavior and performance, rather than broad, unsubstantiated statements. In the next two sections, we will examine some behaviors and strategies that you can adopt, which can influence the willingness and ability of faculty to write strong letters of recommendation for you.

Some Guidelines for Obtaining Enthusiastic Letters of Recommendation

Your behavior and performance is directly related to the willingness of a faculty member to write a strong letter of recommendation or even write a letter at all. Adhering to the following set of guidelines (modified from a list cited in Bloomquist, 1981) can contribute to the type and content of the letter of recommendation a faculty member writes for you. The important overall message of these guidelines is to treat your faculty (i.e., prospective recommenders) with courtesy and respect.

1. Treat your faculty and classes as if you are interested and motivated to learn.
2. Consistently try to be on time for class and other appointments.
3. Be serious about class attendance.
4. Ask questions or contribute to class, especially when urged to by the faculty.
5. Avoid complaining when teachers provide extra learning opportunities. They usually have a sound reason for the assignment and are not simply trying to make your life miserable.
6. Read assignments before class.
7. Avoid asking teachers for references when you are given a library assignment, especially before you look in the library yourself.
8. Avoid trying to be the exception to the rule.
9. Avoid disagreeing with teachers in a haughty and condescending manner.
10. Do not refer to assignments you do not understand "boring, irrelevant, or busy work." Again, there is a sound pedagogical reason for the assignment.
11. Don't be a "classroom lawyer" by always trying to get what you want by twisting the rules to your own advantage.
12. Attempt to perform beyond the minimal requirements for a class.
13. Help to plan or participate in departmental or campus activities -- i.e., get involved.
14. Always attempt to see your teacher or advisor--in a timely manner, not at the last minute--during his or her posted office hours or make an appointment. Don't treat your teachers as if they are on 24

hour call just for your convenience, they have to teach classes, attend meetings, and maybe have a personal life just like you.

Choosing Someone to Write a Letter of Recommendation

Your choices for faculty to write your letters of recommendation are critical. Several criteria below can help guide you in your selection of recommenders.

1. How well does the faculty member know you? Almost every recommendation form or interview begins by asking how long and in what capacity the recommender has known the applicant. You should choose recommenders that have known you for at least two years. You should have taken several classes from your recommender or worked with him or her individually on a research or departmental project. It is difficult for faculty members to write a good letter of recommendation if you have only taken one or even two classes from them and you were a hard-working, successful but "invisible" student. You should get to know potential recommenders well and let them get to know you. Personnel directors and admissions committees are not impressed with recommendations from persons who do not know you very well. They make the assumption that either you have done nothing to allow recommenders to know you well or that those who do know you well do not think highly enough of you to write a letter of recommendation.
2. How positively (strongly) can they recommend you? Do not simply ask a faculty member if he or she will write a letter of recommendation. Ask them if they are able to write a good letter. If the faculty member says no or appears to hesitate, find another recommender! A mediocre letter can be a death blow for your employment or graduate school aspirations. You can have good grades, strong GRE scores, and a great letter of application or personal statement, but if one of your recommenders writes a weak or superficial letter, potential employers and graduate admission committees will hesitate to take a chance on you. Work hard to give faculty reasons to write good letters which include very specific examples of your behavior and performance.
3. How impressed will a prospective employer or graduate admissions committee be with your recommenders? Do not ask for letters of recommendation from your family members, high school counselor, physician, or minister/priest/rabbi. Although these individuals can attest to your strong personal qualities, these are not the qualities which are of concern to potential employers and graduate admissions committees. Employers are interested in evaluating characteristics related to individual productivity, while graduate programs are often interested in creativity, academic skills, and research experience and potential. Therefore, you should choose recommenders with whom you have been involved as a research assistant or who have supervised your work (paid or volunteer) in an applied setting, from whom you have taken research-oriented courses, or who can vouch for your initiative, persistence, dependability, and creativity. Try to select recommenders that have had the opportunity to observe directly your performance, usually from a supervisory perspective, and can write positively about your potential success as an employee or scholar/researcher.

Preparing Materials for Your Recommenders

Your task is not done after a faculty member has agreed to write a letter of recommendation for you. You will need to be prepared to supply them with supplementary information about yourself (they may not know everything about you), information about the person or graduate school to which you are applying, and forms or other relevant format information for the letter. Most importantly, DO NOT PROCRASTINATE. Be sure to give your recommender plenty of time to get the letter completed by any deadlines for receipt of your materials. Several issues and expectations concerning materials to be supplied to recommenders are listed below.

1. It is a good idea to provide the following items to each recommender at least six weeks prior to the deadline for the recommendations. Check with your recommenders as to whether they may want some additional information that is not suggested below.

a. Any required recommendation forms. Be sure to neatly type all information to be provided by the student on the form (e.g., your name, program you are applying for, etc.). Hand written forms create a poor impression.

b. A pre-addressed and stamped envelope for each letter of recommendation. Again, type the address on the envelope.

c. A checklist of all letters to be written including the deadline for receipt of the letter.

d. A resume or vita summarizing your relevant academic, work, and volunteer experiences.

e. A copy of your letter of application or personal statement. This helps the recommender better understand your career objectives. If neither of these items is required, provide your recommender with a clear statement of your career objectives or the type of graduate program to which you are applying.

f. An unofficial copy of your transcript, including overall GPA and psychology GPA.

g. Summarize the basis of your contact with the faculty member: formal course work (include the title, grade, and other aspects of your special performance), research, independent study, readings, informal contact, etc.

h. Include your academic profile including transcripts and test scores. Include anything "extra" or unique about your academic background.

i. Include your non-academic background: jobs, hobbies, sports, community work, political or social involvement, study abroad, travel, etc.

2. Neatly organize all of the materials suggested in item 1 above so that your recommender does not have to search for the envelope that goes with a particular recommendation form. If the recommendations are to be done online, still give this information to your recommender well in advance of any deadlines.

3. If there is the potential that recommendations are to be obtained through a telephone interview, schedule a meeting with your recommender and give him or her your vita, provide a list of prospective employers or graduate schools that may contact him or her, and discuss your personal career goals.

4. One major decision that you will often have to make prior to submitting a recommendation form for graduate school is whether or not to waive your right to see or review the recommendation written

by the faculty member. Under the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, students are entitled to review their records, including letters of recommendation. However, those writing recommendations for you and those reading the recommendations attach more significance to them if it is known that the recommendations will remain confidential. Some faculty may be unwilling to write a letter unless it will remain confidential. Further, your right to see letters of recommendation applies only if you are admitted to the graduate program to which you are applying.

5. Do not "nag" your recommenders about whether or not they have sent a letter. However, you should check on the status of your application materials with a potential employer or graduate admissions committee shortly before the deadline and follow up with the faculty on any missing recommendations. It is also a nice touch to send your recommenders thank you notes after the deadline. Be sure as well to let them know where you end up attending graduate school.

*Portions of this handout were adapted from Handbook of the Marian College Psychology Department (Appleby, 1990), the Psychology Major Handbook for Students Majoring in Psychology at James Madison University, and PSYC SERIES from Kennesaw State University, Marietta, Georgia.