Letters of Recommendation: Building a Strong Foundation

Summer, 2015
So, yeah, Dr. G., I was hoping to get a recommendation from you for my grad apps...

And you are...?

Uh, I'm Dee... I was in your intro class last semester?

I had a hundred students in that class...

You said you really liked my final project...? You gave me an A+?

Uh, sorry, I still don't remember you...

Um, does it matter?

Not really. Here's a letter. Just put your name down on the blank spaces.
Key Points:

- Letters of recommendation are a very important part of your graduate school application.
- They are read and who they come from and what they say is important.
- Letters should come from someone who knows you well and can evaluate your ability to be successful as a graduate student.
- You need to work at developing and nurturing academic relationships, *in part* so you can get good rec letters.

CAVET: This presentation does NOT speak to nuances regarding medical and/or other professional programs.
What makes a strong letter of recommendation?

Letter-writers should:

- State how they know you and in what capacity

- Provide an assessment of your intellectual capability, experimental ability, fundamental training, creativity, and motivation to be successful as a grad student

- Compare you to previous students who they have known over the course of their career
To waive or not to waive?

- Strongly consider waiving your rights to see the letter.
  - Schools look more favorable upon a confidential letter
  - Faculty are more willing to write confidential letters
How many letters do I need?

- Generally 3

If I have more recommendations should I use them?

- Is there a compelling reason to include more?
- What do they add to your application package?
Who should I ask?

The Holy Grail:
Letter One: Professorial faculty
Letter Two: Professorial faculty
Letter Three: Professorial faculty

Examples:
- Professors
- Research mentor(s)
- Advisor
- Senior thesis advisor
What about…

- My non-professorial co-mentor (grad student, postdoc, research scientist)?
- My TA?
- My RA?
- An instructor?
- My coach?
- The Dean, aren’t they faculty?
- My club advisor? Or student affairs staff?
- My mom? But she’s a professor…?
"If your PI doesn't give you a reference letter, I can write one for you!"
Quiz:

● Can you name three professors who you can or might be able to (with the right nurturing) ask for a letter of recommendation?

● Start the list. Revisit it at least twice a term. Put it on your calendar.
What can you do to start building such relationships?

- Go to class…😊
- Participate in class/ask questions
- Attend office hours
- Do research (summer, academic year, for credit, for pay, volunteer, etc.)
- Write a senior thesis
- Meet regularly with your advisor
- Meet with other faculty to discuss your academic goals
- Be a TA
- Participate in campus academic organizations
- Attend campus seminars
Other advice

- Follow-up on initial meetings
- Meet with faculty regularly
- Make yourself, your science, and your goals known
- You need to be your own advocate
- If you are shy, nervous, or just plain scared, find someone who can help you plan and prepare for contact with faculty
- Connect with your career center or graduate dean’s office for support
- Don’t rely on email to build relationships
How do I approach a recommender?

- Don’t wait until the last minute; at least a month before the letter is due
- Make every effort to ask in person
- Ask: Would you be willing to write a letter *supporting* my application? Are you in the position to write me a *strong* letter of recommendation? Would you be willing to write me a *supportive* letter?
- LISTEN CAREFULLY to their answer.
What information should I provide?

- Cover letter with your name and contact information and 2-3 bullet points of what they might emphasize in the letter
- A list of schools to which you are applying, and due dates, with the earliest due date at the top
- Supporting documents (a final, a paper, list of classes taken with professor, etc.)
- An unofficial transcript
- A draft of your statement of purpose/essay
- A resume
- Recommendation forms with applicant information filled in
- Stamped, addressed envelopes to each school or online information (a word of advice about online recs…)
What do I do next?

- Gently nag
  - Email, drop by, bring gifts!
  - Make sure they got links to online letter submission sites
  - Remind the administrative assistant

- Say thank you
  - Send a handwritten thank you note

- Follow-up
  - Let your letter writers know where you’ve been accepted
  - Discuss the process and your decisions with them
  - Let them know where you decide to go
How can I nurture relationships once established?

- Email, call, or visit periodically
- Share interesting work
- Stay up-to-date with their research and successes
- Attend conferences and arrange to meet

Basically, stay in touch.
Key Points Revisited

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