

# SECURING STRONG LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

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**FUTURE**  
  
 **GNITED**

# Letters of Recommendation

**HERMAN**®

by Jim Unger



**“D’you have any other references apart  
from this one from your mother?”**

# Letters of Recommendation

What are they, why are they important, and when do you need them?

- *An independent assessment of one's preparation, abilities, and skills to be successful.*
- *They are important because they provide a reviewer information about you that they might not otherwise get*
- *You are often asked for letters of rec when applying for jobs, graduate school, research programs, scholarships or other awards and prizes*

# 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

# Who should I ask?

The Holy Grail:

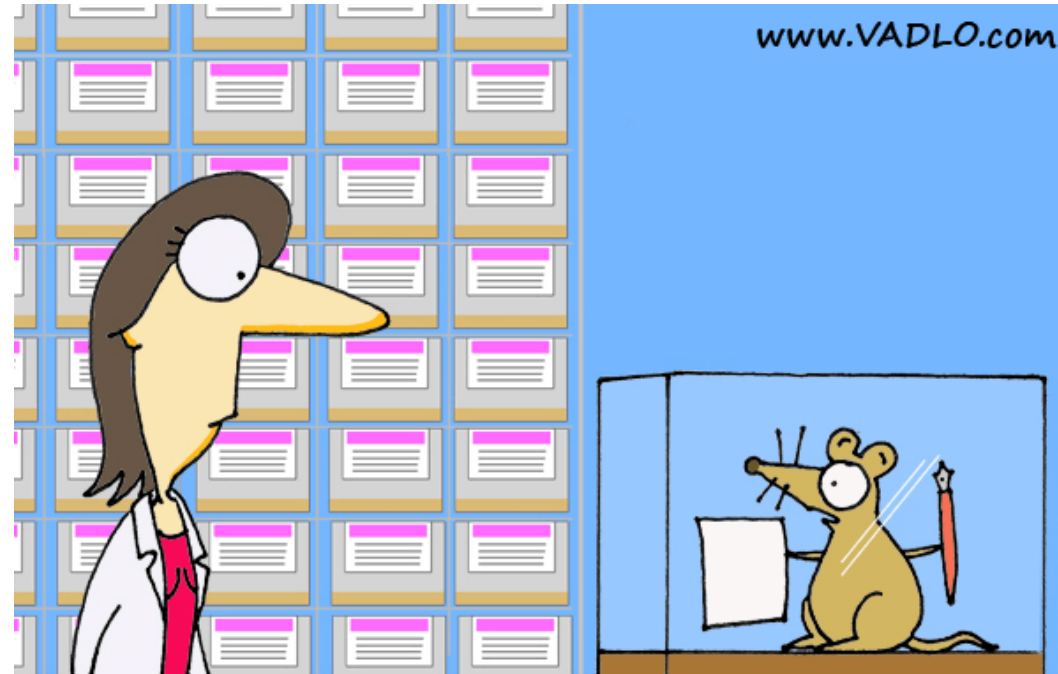
Letter One: Faculty

Letter Two: Faculty

Letter Three: Faculty

Examples:

- Professors
- Research mentor(s)
- Academic advisor
- Senior thesis advisor



"If your PI doesn't give you a reference letter,  
I can write one for you!"

# 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?

# Quiz:

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





# Building Strong Academic Relationships with Faculty

- Go to class...😊
- Participate in class/ask questions
- Attend office hours and have something to discuss
- Do research
- Write a senior thesis
- Meet regularly with your advisor
- Meet with faculty to discuss your academic and professional goals
- Be a TA
- Participate in campus academic organizations
- Attend campus seminars

# The results

- Support and mentoring
- Engagement
- Increased learning
- Access

And, yes, strong letters of recommendation

# Possible roadblocks

- Faculty are scary!
- Feeling like you are bothering them.
- Feeling like an imposter.
- Worried they might say no.
- Difficulty in advocating for yourself/singing your own praises.
- Having competing responsibilities that keep you from developing the needed relationships.

# Other advice

- Follow-up on initial meetings and meet with faculty regularly
- Make yourself, your science, and your goals known
- 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 solely on email to build relationships

# How do I approach a recommender?

- Don't wait until the last minute; ask at least a month before the letter is due
- Make every effort to ask in person
- Ask: 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 the answer.
- DO NOT offer or agree to write the letter for them.

# What information should I provide?

- Cover letter with your name, contact information and 2-3 bullet points of what they might emphasize in the letter or any gaps in your application that they can address
- A list of schools to which you are applying, and due dates
- A resume or CV
- An unofficial transcript
- A draft of your statement of purpose/essay
- Supporting documents (a final, a paper, etc.)

# What do I do next?

- Gently nag
  - Make sure they got links to online letter submission sites
  - Remind the administrative assistant
  - Email, drop by, bring snacks!
- Say thank you
  - Send a hand-written thank you note
- Follow-up
  - Let your letter writers know the results of your applications
  - Discuss the process and your decisions with them

# Staying in touch

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



# Key Points Revisited

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