SECURING STRONG LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

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“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

• Letters of recommendation are a very important part of your graduate school application
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