

# Requesting Letters of Evaluation/Recommendation

## Why Do You Need Letters?

Professional schools require letters of recommendation/evaluation to help them learn more about you. Each school may have different requirements for letters, but they are all looking for in-depth information about you as an applicant from someone else's perspective. These letters are important and obtaining them requires advanced planning, networking and initiative.

## Evaluation vs. Recommendation Letters

These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but professional schools often refer to *Letters of Evaluation* as they favor a balanced approach in the letter that speaks to your positive qualities (honestly and without hyperbole) as well as areas where you may need to improve. Generally schools want to know the following:

- How long and in what context the evaluator has known you
- How the evaluator rates you on qualities such as:
  - Social skills including emotional stability, judgment, empathy, maturity & perseverance
  - Interpersonal skills, communication skills (written, oral, listening), & teamwork ability
  - Resourcefulness, reliability, resilience and adaptability
  - Self-confidence, motivation & leadership potential
  - Intellectual ability, curiosity, & critical thinking
  - Cultural competence (demonstrating knowledge of social and cultural differences)

## Planning Ahead for Letters

It is essential that you plan ahead for letters. You need to interact with the people who will write your letters. Go to office hours. Tell them about what you are hoping to do and why it is important to you. Give them a chance to get to know you. A letter that only states your grade in a course will not help your application. Your letter writers need a chance to learn about you as a person.

## Tips When Asking for Letters

- First and foremost, be courteous. You are making a request that takes considerable time.
- Ideally, faculty and others writing your letters should be familiar with professional education, knowledgeable about the qualities admissions committees are seeking, able to compare you with your peers, and well acquainted with you.
- You should request letters at least **2 months** in advance, if possible, but no less than 3 weeks in advance.
- It is best to speak with your possible letter writer in person.
  - Set up an appointment to go see him/her or go in during office hours.
  - Go in prepared. Be ready to explain what you are applying for and why you want to go into that field. Ask the letter writer if they feel they could support you in your endeavor by writing a **positive** letter of recommendation.
  - If they hesitate or seem leery of agreeing, just thank them and move on. It is better to ask someone else than to get a very short letter that does not show any personal knowledge of you or one that is negative.
  - Hopefully they agree. Provide a brief resume and statement about why you want to enter your chosen field to the evaluator. These must be typed.
- **Politely** follow up to verify letters have been sent. Rather than asking if they have done it, for example, you could ask if they need any additional information from you to assist them in writing it.
- Be sure to send a thank you note to your letter writer and let him/her know what happens with your application.

**Tip for Parallel Planning:** Consider asking the evaluator to write a more general letter for you. You could open an account through an online service such as [Interfolio](https://www.interfolio.com/) and maintain that letter for your own use (such as post-baccalaureate program applications) as long as you continue to pay the fee for the Interfolio account.  
<https://www.interfolio.com/>

## Preparing for your Giant Leap

[purdue.edu/preprofessional](https://purdue.edu/preprofessional)

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## Choosing Letter Writers

- Research your schools and make sure you are getting letters appropriate for the schools to which you are applying.
- Ideally you need to ask people who have come to know you and can speak to your communication skills, intellect, and personality.

### Some Tips

- For faculty letters: you should have taken a class with them. Schools want to know about your performance in the classroom.
- It is best to have faculty who have PhDs writing your letters. If you need to use a graduate assistant or instructor, that is fine, but you don't want every letter in the packet to be written by people without advanced degrees.
- Ask graduate student writers to sign the letter and have the course's supervising professor sign the letter as well.

## Counterproductive References

Some types of letters are not particularly helpful to professional programs. Generally you should avoid the following letters:

- Do not ask high school teachers to write your letters unless you have been working with them on a current project. Professional schools believe your high schools teachers knew you 4 years ago and you should have changed considerably since then.
- Do not ask your academic advisor to write one of your letters unless you are an officer in a club he/she works with or this is specifically requested. Generally, advisor letters offer little other than stating you are nice and have X grades (which schools already know).
- Letters from clergy can be difficult as they may write about your personal religious beliefs which schools cannot use to evaluate you. If you want to ask someone from the clergy it should only be if you have a leadership role and ask the letter writer to focus their comments on this.

- Do not request letters from fellow students or family members as these will not be taken seriously by the admissions committee.

## Waiving Your Access to Letters

Many schools will ask if you are waiving your FERPA rights that would allow you to read the letter. It is your legal right to maintain your access; however, professional schools often assume you were expecting something negative in your letters if you keep your access to them. It is generally best to have discussed any possible negatives with your letter writer rather than maintaining your access to the letter.

## Information to Include with your Request for an Evaluation

After considering who best knows you, discussing your plans with your letter writer, and assessing whether he/she can write in support of your application, it is a good idea to provide your letter writer with some basic information.

- Your name and email
  - A basic resume
  - Letter deadline
  - Where the letter will be sent
  - Describe any elements that must be included in the letter and any special instructions
- 1) Describe what you are applying for.
  - 2) Explain your motivation for pursuing this program/scholarship/opportunity.
  - 3) Describe the skills/characteristics you have that make you a good fit for this program/scholarship/opportunity.
  - 4) Describe three activities which have contributed to your readiness for this program/scholarship/opportunity. What have these activities taught you? How have they affected/changed you?
  - 5) Explain why you are approaching this person with your letter request.
  - 6) Describe any special points you would like the letter writer to make if he/she is comfortable doing so.
  - 7) **Ask the letter writer to save the letter in case you need an updated version in the future.**