



Recommendation Letters and Admission Essays

Most schools ask you to provide three letters of recommendation. Naturally, you should get letters from faculty who know you best. A bland or neutral letter, from somebody who knows you only as a name on a class roll, can hurt more than it helps.

Letters of recommendation play an especially important role if there is some anomalous or seemingly contradictory aspect of your application. For example, consider a student whose financial or family problems had an adverse impact on academic performance during a particular year. A letter-writer can offer an explanation that prevents this from being held against the student.

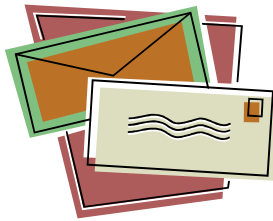
Good prospects for good letters are your advisor and faculty teaching the smaller, intensive courses.

Faculty with whom you have done Research with, those from whom you have taken several courses, or faculty with whom you have an affinity and who know you well could provide helpful letters.

The single best thing you can do to get a good letter of recommendation-- particularly if a teacher does not have a long acquaintance with you--**is to provide your letter writer with useful information.** Here is the type of information letter writers often find helpful:

- Your overall GPA
- A list of courses you have taken, and grades earned
- Your minor if you have one
- The titles and abstracts of any research papers you have written

- Honor societies to which you belong
- Awards that you have won
- Activities in which you have participated (and any offices held)
- Work experience
- Service activities such as volunteer work
- A description of your professional goals



Application Essay tips:

- ❑ Plan on spending a **lot** of time on this essay. This will probably be the most difficult essay you've ever written.
- ❑ Don't use so much advanced vocabulary that your essay makes no sense
- ❑ Keep it brief. (1-2 pages unless otherwise specified)
- ❑ Be careful using humor, you don't want to offend anyone!

What to include in your essay:

- ❑ Themes you can identify in your life that have pointed you toward your interests. (**Caution:** talking about your own mental health problems is almost never a good idea.)
- ❑ College experiences that are relevant to your intended career. (Ex: Volunteer work)
- ❑ Research experiences and what you learned from these experiences. (Mention the kind of responsibilities you had, who you worked for)
- ❑ Comment on your GPA or GRE scores, if you feel like they are not as good as you'd like them to be.
- ❑ Talk about your goals in graduate school, and what you hope to learn and gain while you're there.
- ❑ Talk about why the program you're applying to is a good choice for your career goals.
- ❑ It would be wise for you to have at least one paragraph that you change for each school so you can include specifics about each school, especially what faculty's research interests you the most.
- ❑ Sometimes it's also important to mention what type of work you would like to be doing after you finish graduate school. Again, focus on how the particular program you're applying to will help you prepare for this type of work.

Obviously, proofread your essay a zillion times and make sure that there is not a single punctuation or grammatical error in it. Also, have several good writers (including several who are graduate students or professors) look over your essay for you and offer suggestions.

For help with your essay, visit the University Center for Excellence in Writing located in SO 107.

