

Clinical Issues In Corrections Research Lab

Guide to Letters of Recommendation

Roosevelt University

Elijah P. Ricks, Ph.D.
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Forward

The letter of recommendation is a vital part of students' or job seekers' applications. It is a testimony of your knowledge, skills, character, and ability to succeed and excel in whatever setting you seek. Admissions boards and hiring committees often weigh letters of recommendation heavily because they have little to no interaction with you by the time they review your materials. They therefore rely on others' knowledge of who you are and what type of student/employee you will be if they admit/hire you. For this reason, the process of getting a letter of recommendation is extremely important, and should begin months or years before the letter is actually due.

This guide exists to help you through the process of obtaining a letter of recommendation, including whom to ask, when to ask, and what to do once they have agreed.

Part I. Before the Letter

Keep in mind that the letter of recommendation will synthesize the writer's entire experience with you. Thus, it is important that their experience with you exposes them to the attributes you want them to address in the letter, and that their experience with you is positive and professional from the first moment you meet.

Choosing Recommenders

Most positions require three letters of recommendation, and some may ask for as many as five. It can often be a difficult task to decide whom to ask for letters of recommendation. You should choose people who have known you long enough to give an assessment of your ability to succeed in whatever position you are seeking. Undergraduates tend to focus on performing well in classes, but in reality this is not usually enough to get into graduate school or get a job. Graduate programs and employers want to know not only that you are intelligent and task-oriented, but also if you can work well with others, have ambition, demonstrate ingenuity, and do these things consistently. They want to hear from people who can speak to these abilities, and that requires that they have a *relationship* with you.

Relationships are very difficult to build in a classroom of 100 or more students. Start early in your education to develop relationships with people who would make good recommenders.

Kiss of Death – The Recommender Does Not Know You

Some good ways to begin a professional relationship with a potential recommender are to

- Volunteer to help out in a research lab, or at an agency.
- Apply to be a Teaching or Research Assistant.

- Attend office hours and talk about professional goals.
- Join student organizations that offer extra time with potential recommenders.
- Talk about research ideas with the potential recommender.
- Ask about current projects on which the potential recommender is working.
- Attend departmental presentations, and strike up conversations.

Although the relationship is a very important ingredient to a letter of recommendation, there are other important considerations. Gauge your choices for recommenders by the position you will eventually seek. That is, if you want to get into a school that focuses on research, a good recommender should be able to speak to your research skills. If you want a position with an emphasis on clinical skills, your recommender should have seen you work with people in clinical settings. If you want a position that requires leadership skills, make sure the recommender has seen you in a leadership role.

Kiss of Death – The Recommender Cannot Speak to Your Abilities

The majority of positions require three letters. If you have developed a relationship with only one professor, you may struggle to decide who else could speak to your character. Take some caution when considering other sources of letters. Some positions specifically ask for people who have known you for a number of years in a variety of settings, but this is usually for positions that have some element of security to them (e.g., a government position that requires access to confidential information). Usually, the positions you seek will want professional references. These are people who are not related to you, and with whom your relationship is primarily professional. In other words, they should be relatively unbiased sources of information. Imagine what it would be like to sit on an admissions board and read a letter of recommendation from an applicant's mother. She probably would have a lot of good things to say about the applicant, but she is probably not the best source of unbiased information, so the admissions board would not put much weight on what she says. On the other hand, if there is a letter from someone whom the applicant first approached professionally, for the purpose of gaining experience or skills in a certain area, that letter will carry more weight.

Tip – Avoid using family members or friends as recommenders.

Once you have begun an initial relationship with the potential recommender, it is a good idea to speak openly about what you hope to gain through your volunteering, and what your professional and academic goals are. You may even consider broaching the subject of recommendation early on, stating that you hope to earn a letter through your performance in the lab. This will not only keep fresh in your mind why you are there, but it will also help the professor to take note of your performance and adjust your duties to give you the variety of experiences that will help you to reach your goals.

Summary. Your recommender should have *extensive* experience with you, hopefully in a variety of *relevant* situations. They should be able to speak to your abilities in the areas related to the

position you seek. Talk early and openly with your potential recommender about how you are doing, and how your experiences are helping with your goals, or if they should be adjusted.

Earning the Letter

Many excellent letters of recommendation can come through voluntary work. Although volunteering will take away from your time, if you do it correctly it will pay for itself. Think of the letter of recommendation as your paycheck for volunteering. To earn a mediocre letter, do mediocre work. To earn an excellent letter, do excellent work.

You should expect your recommender to write about what they experienced with you—if you were late to all of your scheduled meetings, were always texting when you were supposed to be doing work, would cut corners in paperwork, and so on, you should expect that to be in the letter. Therefore, it is vital that you demonstrate your work ethic and professionalism through all that you do.

Part II. Asking for the Letter

Once you are relatively confident in whom you would like to ask for a letter, there are many important considerations to take in getting the letter. Your objective from the moment your recommender agrees to write you a letter is to make the process as easy as possible for them.

Tip – Make the Process as Simple as Possible for Your Recommenders

Time

Letters can often be difficult and time-consuming to write¹. Good letters are especially challenging. For this reason, it is absolutely vital to ask your recommenders as far in advance as possible before your letter is due. Not only does this make their task less daunting, but if they are unable or unwilling to write a letter then you have that much more time to ask another person.

Kiss of Death – You Don't Give the Recommender Enough Time to Write You a Good Letter.

Ask recommenders for letters as soon as you know you need one. Even if it is months in advance, ask now!

Real Experience: As I was applying to graduate school, I asked a recommender for a letter 4 months before it was due. This turned out to be very important because I did not realize she would be leaving for a remote sabbatical in the next week. She still agreed to write a glowing letter, and I was accepted into UTEP!

¹ Sometimes recommenders are open to the idea of you writing your own letter, and then giving it to them to review, revise, and then endorse. This saves them the hassle of writing an entire letter, and allows you to personalize it as you wish. If a recommender seems hesitant to write because of time constraints, you might suggest this option, but do so with caution. Some people dislike this idea because of the obvious bias.

A good rule of thumb is to give recommenders an *absolute minimum* of 1 month notice before a letter is due, but more time is always better. When asking for the letter, it is also a good idea to explain the position to which you are applying, why it would be a good fit for you, and why you chose to ask that specific recommender. For example,

Poor Request

Subject: (none)

Dr. Smith,

What's up? Hey, would you mind writing me a letter of recommendation? I know it's been like, 2 semesters since I took your course, but I was the one in the third row, who was always wearing a jacket, remember? Anyway, I wasn't sure who else to ask, and I'm running out of time. I REALLY want this position.

Thanks,

Jonny

Better Request

Subject: Request for Letter of Reference

Dear Dr. Smith,

I hope this note finds you well. I very much enjoyed taking your Abnormal Psychology course last Spring. It piqued my interest in psychology, and since then I have decided that I'd like to get some experience within the mental health field. I recently learned of a position at the state hospital that is looking for a psychology major, and I think I would make a good fit while also building my resume before applying to graduate school.

I am writing to ask if you would be willing and able to write a letter of recommendation for me for the position. I hope that, based on my class performance and our discussions about psychology careers, you can primarily speak to my consistency in academic performance and career goals. I've attached a copy of the paper I wrote for your Abnormal Psychology course, along with my resume, in case you would like to review them before agreeing.

If you do agree, please let me know and I will send more information. The applications are due in 6 weeks, and you could send you letter in confidentially.

Thank you,

Jonathan Johnson

What to Give the Recommender

Remember that you are probably one of many students/applicants asking for letters. To help your recommenders write you a stellar letter, they may need some help in recalling and summarizing their entire experience with you. Give your recommenders documents and brief descriptions that will help them to write you a good and thorough letter.

Include the following:

- **Your Curriculum Vitae:** this is a “story of your life” which centers on information relevant to your professional development. It is similar to a resume. Include your education, research and teaching experience (including teaching assistant positions), volunteer work, relevant employment, any publications or presentations at conferences, and so on (please note that, due to Latin grammar, the plural of “curriculum vitae” is “curricula vitae”)
- **A Summary of Academic Performance:** Give recommenders a quick list of the courses you’ve taken, your grades, and highlight the courses you took with that recommender. If you wrote a particularly interesting paper or gave a presentation in their class, remind them of the topic, or include a copy.
- **Your GPA, and Your Psychology GPA:** This is a very quick way to demonstrate your academic achievement. If you have a less-than-exemplary GPA, you might also consider breaking it down for them by showing that your psychology GPA is much higher than your overall GPA.
- **A Paragraph About Career Goals:** Briefly outline where you see yourself. Do not assume that the writer knows what type of work you want to do. If you seek a practice-oriented career and your writer makes it seem like you care only about research, the discrepancy may be a problem.
- **A Paragraph About Special Considerations:** If you have worked full time while attending college, really want to work with children, made a special contribution to a research idea, have special skill with some software, etc., this is a good place to remind the recommender. They may find a good way to highlight these strengths or interests in the letter.

Keeping Track

There are essentially three modes of letter delivery.

1. Electronic delivery of letters has become the default method. Typically, the agency asks you to tell your recommenders to send their letters as attachments to a specific email address.
2. Another popular electronic delivery method is for you to give the recommenders’ contact information to the agency, and the agency will send a request to the recommenders. This often involves receiving a web link that allows the recommender to

securely upload their letter. Make sure you have their correct contact information, or no one will ever see your letter!

3. You may encounter some schools that still prefer to have letters physically mailed to the hiring committee.

Again, remember that your job is to make the process of submission very easy for the recommenders. Especially if you are applying to several schools or positions, you should keep track of the places, along with any relevant information. If places want physical letters mailed to them, it is your job to address envelopes, stamp them, print out any required forms, and paper clip everything together so that the recommenders can simply complete the forms or print out letters, seal the envelopes, and place them in the mail. If you expect them to do all of the organization or pay for postage, you should also expect to get a mediocre letter!

Letter writers usually write one letter, and then adjust it slightly for each position. Consider using a tracking sheet that you can include with all of your reminders and updates about the letters (e.g., Table 1). This should be simple, straightforward, and useful.

Table 1 - Sample Tracking Table

Agency Name	Submission Type	Due Date	Notes
University of Psychology – Legal Position	Send attachment to sprof@up.edu Dr. Susan Prof, Chair of the Department of Psychology	12.1.15	Big emphasis on diversity, and mentoring experience
College of Counseling – Trauma Specialization	Will contact you through email if I pass selection	Not specified*	This is a counseling-only school, very little research emphasis.
School of Science – Research Assistant	Complete the form at http://sos.edu/form12	1.15.16	Request evidence of leadership.

*School applications will virtually always have a due date, but some jobs may be “open until filled” for example. Use some caution when telling recommenders that there is “no due date.” If your recommender is the type of person who procrastinates, you may not get considered for the position because your recommender kept putting off submitting a letter. You may want to give “open until filled” positions a “due date” that is similar to the others to encourage letter writers to finish them.

Part III. After the Letters

As the letters get submitted and the application process moves forward, it is nice to let your writers know how things are going. If you are applying to positions continually, make sure to let them know. As deadlines approach, give them gentle reminders, and thank them often for their help.

If you have success in the application process, make sure to keep in touch with your recommenders. This not only keeps your relationship with them alive, but reinforces a positive attitude about writing letters. Recommenders enjoy learning of their students’ success. Send

them a brief email thanking them for their letter and inform them that you were offered an interview, or that you were offered the position you sought.

Concluding Thoughts

The letter of recommendation is one of the most important elements of an application to a job or graduate school. As such, it requires much forethought and preparation, even years before you will actually need the letter. Form professional relationships early on, do outstanding work, and always have your future in mind. Make the process of letter writing and submission as easy as possible for your recommenders, and show gratitude for their time and effort.