

# So you want a letter of recommendation?



**TIPS ON AN IMPORTANT STEP TOWARD GAINING  
ADMISSION TO THE GRADUATE PROGRAM OR JOB  
OF YOUR DREAMS**

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Letters of recommendation... "are taken very seriously, and sometimes are as important as grades and test scores."

Keith-Spiegel and Wiederman (2000), p. 175

*The Complete Guide to Graduate School Admissions*

## An informal survey of SOU psychology faculty



- 1) what pleases you most about the process of writing letters of recommendation?
  - “learning more about an individual--sometimes surprising experiences and skills he or she has had.”
  - “I'm happiest when the student has done a conscientious job of preparing me for writing the letter (completing the "Request for Letters...form; adding info that may be helpful)”

## 1) what pleases you most about the process of writing letters of recommendation?



- **Mary Russell-Miller says:**
  - Gives me a packet with ALL relevant information including..
    - resume
    - sample of writing
    - copy of goals - most grad program require a statement about this
    - AMPLE time to do recommendations...4 - 6 weeks out.
  - Also, you "may" want to add... "I cannot advocate for you (the student) unless you advocate for yourself by demonstrating a sincere motivation towards graduate school. I need to know that you are committed, serious, and ready to meet the challenge. If you approach the application process haphazardly, you have told me that you are not ready."

## 2) What drives you crazy about the process?



- students who don't give enough lead time;
- students who don't understand that--for grad programs--we can't just write a bunch of superlatives about them, but rather need to individualize the letter with specific examples of skills and experiences that warrant our recommendation;
- students who e-mail many years after graduation who expect me to suddenly remember details about them even though they can't remember exactly which course they took from me and/or which term;
- students who didn't do so well in my courses and still expect a good recommendation since they had several courses from me.

## 2) What drives you crazy about the process?



- Students .... “get lulled into believing that nobody reads these anyway and so it won't matter if they get a lukewarm letter from a professor who knows very little about their skills. Another potential reason is that there is a disconnect between the perception of the student teacher relationship and they lose sight of the fact that, in any given year, a professor can sometimes have lots (hundreds?) of students, but a student probably has less than 10 professors a year. I always tell students that a great letter by itself will not get you into a grad school but a weak letter will prevent it.”

# Three main themes in letters of recommendation: Knowledge, Skills, and Characteristics



- **Knowledge**
  - Does the student “think” like a psychologist?
  - Does the student show mastery of terminology, concepts, and theories of psychology?
- **Skills**
  - Does the student communicate effectively (written AND spoken)?
  - Does the student show evidence that he or she can take classroom knowledge and use it in the real world?
  - Is the student proficient in computer and statistical methods?
- **Characteristics**
  - Is the student inquisitive?
  - Is the student motivated?
  - Does the student make service contributions to the department and fellow students?
  - Does the student complete work on time and of high quality?
  - Does the student relate well in interpersonal settings?
  - Does the student show intellectual and social maturity?

# Sample application and letter of recommendation forms (Portland State University)



- Departmental: <http://www.psy.pdx.edu/grad/gradapp.php>
- University: [http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs\\_forms.php](http://www.gsr.pdx.edu/ogs_forms.php)



# Do....



- Ask in person. If that is not an option—use the phone. Timing is important—avoid asking right before class or when your professor is running to a meeting.
- Communicate to your professor about the programs/jobs you are applying for. Your letter writer can adjust points of emphasis according to the degree or job you are pursuing.
- Give your letter writers at least one month's notice
- Organize the process!! Make the process as easy as possible for your letter writers. You want them focusing on the content of the letters, not doing busy work or wondering where and when to send your 10 letters.
- Make clear all deadlines.
- Offer to email your professor reminders as deadlines approach
- Make clear any special instructions.
  - Where/how the letter is to be sent (online, to the applicant, or the school directly).
- Waive your right to view the letter (graduate programs will have greater confidence in what they read if they know the letter has not been reviewed by the student).
- Save samples of your work (exams, especially papers). Let your letter writers know that these materials are available upon request.
- Follow up with your letter writers. Let them know the decisions on your applications

# Do not....



- Email your request.
- Assume that it is a professor's job to write letters for students.
- Request a letter of recommendation to graduate school from someone who is not a PhD. (Master's programs are probably ok. But avoid if you are applying to a doctoral program).

“A lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part.”

# Which of the following is the best way to “pop the question”?



- A) I want to go to graduate school more than anything, can you write me a letter of recommendation?
- B) Can you write me a strong letter of recommendation for graduate school applications?
- C) Remember me? I had you for Learning and Memory two years ago. Will you write me a letter of recommendation?
- D) Can you write me a letter of recommendation for graduate school applications?

## B) Can you write me a **strong** letter of recommendation for graduate school applications?



- **Why is this the best answer?**

- You do not want anything but **strong** letters.
- Even a mediocre or neutral letter of recommendation can hurt you. It leaves committees with more questions than answers.
- You want to give your professor the opportunity to either decline, or warn that the letter will contain all information she or he can use to evaluate you.

# What do graduate programs want to know about you?



**Based on a survey of 143 graduate programs across all major areas of psychology the following skills are what committees look for in letters of recommendation:**

- Motivated and hard-working
- High intellectual/scholarly ability
- Research skills
- Emotionally stable and mature
- Writing skills
- Speaking skills
- Teaching skills/potential
- Works well with others
- Creative and original
- Strong knowledge of area of study
- Strong character or integrity
- Special skills (e.g., computer or lab)
- Capable of analytical thought
- Broad general knowledge
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How do you ensure that these qualities are addressed in your letter?

- 1) Showcase these skills in a sincere, consistent manner with faculty.
- 2) Identify particular skills that you may need to improve on and seek help.
- 3) Communicate these items with your letter writers (I personally require students to provide evidence to back up the skill set they want emphasized)

# What do employers want to know about you?



## **Employers who interview psychology majors have looked for the following in hiring decisions (listed in order of importance)**

- Deals effectively with a wide variety of people
- Displays appropriate interpersonal skills
- Listens carefully and accurately
- Shows initiative and persistence
- Exhibits effective time management
- Holds high ethical standards and expects the same of others
- Handles conflict successfully
- Speaks articulately and persuasively
- Works productively as a member of a team
- Plans and carries out projects successfully
- Thinks logically and creatively
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## **Plus:**

- 4) Many of these involve social skills that you may have less opportunity to display in classrooms. Get involved in departmental activities, events, and clubs.