



How to Properly  
Request Letters of  
Recommendation  
From Your Professors:

**ASK, Don't  
TELL**

John Gomez, PhD  
Our Lady of the Lake  
University (TX)

**R**equesting a letter of recommendation is a professional favor that you, as a junior colleague, should ask a senior colleague for with the respect and sensitivity characteristic of all professional interactions. One asks for a favor, one does not tell a professor what to do by simply dropping off a recommendation form. It is a common mistake to assume that professors will write a strong letter if you simply drop off a recommendation form in their mailbox or e-mail them a web link. If you have not confirmed a professor's willingness to write your letter, the person may not follow through, or even worse, the person may write a negative letter—disastrous situations you might have avoided if you had talked with the professor first. A strong and effective letter of recommendation is the end product of a student-faculty partnership that you initiate. This article discusses how to properly request letters of recommendation—and how not to request them—with specific instructions and suggestions from some experienced professors.

Strong letters of recommendation are one of the most important parts of every student's chances of success when applying to graduate school in psychology (APA, 2007). Good grades and test scores are an important start to earning admission to the graduate school of your dreams, but they are not enough by themselves. A perusal of *Graduate Study in Psychology* (APA, 2015) shows that most graduate programs in our field rate letters of recommendation as “high” in importance. Graduate admission committees are particularly impressed by letters of recommendation from faculty mentors with whom a student has worked closely (Buskist & Burke, 2007; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000).

A letter of recommendation is a professional assessment of your potential to complete graduate work or perform successfully on the job. Letters should go beyond describing your classroom work (she's an “A” student) because such basic information can be easily inferred from your academic transcript. The best kind of letters describe your devotion to research, to practice, or to a particular area of psychology; your ability to grasp difficult concepts and ideas; your “teachability” (i.e., whether you welcome corrective feedback); and your initiative and ambitions. They describe your strengths inside and outside of the classroom (e.g., your involvement

in local Psi Chi chapter activities or in undergraduate research opportunities available at your university). Letters describing you only in the classroom suggest to admissions committees that you are not really committed enough to psychology to go beyond the minimum required classroom work. Strong letters of recommendation make your application more competitive, and weak or uninformative letters hurt your chances of being accepted into graduate school or successfully landing a job.

### How to Properly Request Letters

Your professor must explicitly agree to write a strong letter of recommendation, and this results from your seeking a student-faculty partnership. Discuss it with the faculty member face-to-face. Do not just drop off forms to be filled out or send a web address for submitting the letter. You are negotiating with your letter writers when you meet in person to ask for a strong, enthusiastic letter of support. This respects professors' right to say no, that they cannot write an enthusiastic letter for you. If that is the case, don't hear this as a rejection but simply move on because an unenthusiastic letter may well have done more harm than good.

Send an e-mail to a prospective letter writer requesting to schedule a meeting to discuss your need for letters of recommendation. In that subsequent meeting, you will explain your career path, why you are applying to graduate school, and only then ask if the professor feels comfortable writing you a *strong* (use that word) letter of recommendation. Writing these letters takes a considerable amount of time, so always approach potential letter writers at least three weeks prior to the first deadline.

### How Not to Request Letters

Here are three e-mail messages received from students (adapted from Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000) illustrating how not to request letters of recommendation:

1. “Hi. I was in your introductory psychology course back in 2009. Long time no see! You gave me a B. I graduated in 2012 and have decided to go back to graduate school. Can you believe it? OMG! Attached is the form that you need to fill out. Thank you. —Angela Airhead”
2. “I am a student in this department. I am

applying to graduate programs, and I want to get into a good one. I have never taken a class from you, and we have never met. But a letter of recommendation from you would be very helpful. I have enclosed my personal statement. Thank you for your help. —Carl Clueless”

3. “Hi. Attached are recommendation forms for the seven graduate programs I am applying to. Notice that the first one is due next week, so you will have to get to it right away. —Samantha Sorrong”

The simple rule is ask, don't tell. Do not assume that, if you earned a good grade in a course and the professor seemed to like you, you can just leave off the recommendation forms in a mailbox. Applications often request that you list the names of the people who will write letters of support on your behalf. Never list a name unless that person has explicitly agreed to write a letter for you. Unless you receive expressed permission, the professor may not follow through, leaving the admissions committee to ponder your poor judgment if someone you declared would recommend you never bothered to do so.

### Who Should Write Your Letters of Recommendation?

Most graduate programs require two to three letters from different people. When choosing letter writers, remember that every person does not need to discuss every aspect of your career potential, your skills, and your character. Seek a set of letters that speak to the range of your academic, research, service and leadership, and applied work experiences. Ask individuals who know you well inside and outside of the classroom, and who know you in different capacities. These individuals may include, but are not limited to, faculty members, supervisors, internship coordinators, and employers who are qualified to assess your work habits, intelligence, judgment, integrity, and other characteristics related to your potential to succeed in graduate school.

Your strongest letters of recommendation are most likely written by professors in your major or in your minor field of study. Preferably, you should have taken at least one or two courses with the faculty member where you performed at a high level, earning “A” grades or a combination of “A” and “B” grades. It is also preferable that you have had other academic interactions

outside of class. Not all of your letter writers need to be psychologists. For example, a work supervisor, preferably in a psychology-related field, would be satisfactory. Professors in your minor field of study are acceptable if they can speak to your range of capacities as they fit your targeted graduate field of study.

### Give Each Letter Writer a Portfolio of Information About Yourself

Admissions committees want letters of recommendation to distinguish the applicant in some noteworthy way (Norcross & Sayette, 2014). If your professors are to write a strong letter for you, they need to be able to discuss at length specific examples and demonstrations of your abilities, potential, and personal qualities. They need to describe concrete evidence that hopefully sets you apart from your peers and helps establish that you do indeed have the characteristics that make you an optimal candidate for the job or graduate program.

Provide your letter writers with all of the information they will need to prepare your letters of recommendation by creating an electronic portfolio. Affirm, document, and help them remember all the great things you have done during your college years both inside and outside of your courses together. Even professors who know you

well may not know about everything that is relevant to your graduate school or job applications.

1. **Write a cover letter** briefly describing why you are choosing to go to graduate school and why you are interested in certain programs. List the contents of your portfolio. End the cover letter with a thank you message and your contact information.
2. **List essential information** about each graduate program you are applying to including the school's name, location, and the exact title of the graduate program. Add a succinct description of what exactly attracts you to this program, with at least three or four specific characteristics. Rank each listed school as a "dream" graduate school (love to get into, but hard to), as a "great" school (solid reputation), or as a "safety" school (confident you can get in, you seem to exceed the standards).
3. **Provide a separate list or spreadsheet** of the due dates for each letter, listed soonest to latest. Indicate the means of delivery by including web link information or mailing addresses.
4. **If applicable, provide the recommender forms** from those graduate schools requesting a paper letter along with

a typed, addressed, and stamped #10 business-sized envelope for each; do not put your name as the return address. Make sure you fill in your name on the recommender forms and sign the waiver statement, checking "yes" that you waive the right to view the submitted letter; admissions committees prefer for students to waive this right.

5. **Write and include your curriculum vitae**, listing honors and awards, research experience, other relevant work experience (e.g., tutoring, student assistant), internships, volunteer activities, and special skills (e.g., languages spoken). Provide a copy of your current academic transcript, and highlight the courses you took from the particular professors to whom you are delivering this portfolio to help them remember your past courses together.
6. **Provide a draft of your personal statement**, or letter of intent, that you have written as part of your application for your graduate programs. This summary of significant experiences or events that shaped you as a person and influenced your present goals and ambitions will help your letter writer accurately discuss your abilities and potential for graduate studies.

## How to Influence What Letter Writers Say About You

You influence the future content of your letters of recommendation by your actions and words today in the presence of your letter writers. Professors write strong letters for students we remember, the ones who stood out in class because they showed enthusiasm and inquisitiveness (Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). Showcase positive features of your academic prowess, your personality, and your social skills that you want future letter writers to remember about you. If you sit passively and quietly in your classes, do not get involved in the major, and do not interact with faculty in memorable ways, it will be very difficult for us to write strong letters of recommendation for you when you need us. This will be the case even if you truly are a very intelligent person with good grades, strong test scores, and great

potential (Wilson, 2000). Here's what you can do today to ensure strong letters of recommendation in your future.

### Get Noticed In and Out of the Classroom

**Be an active participant.** Ask thoughtful questions and contribute constructively to class discussions so professors remember your energy and enthusiasm. Do not let yourself be an invisible member on a classroom roster. Get noticed and make your professors remember the lasting image of how you spoke intelligently and sat in the same seat every day every week in that particular classroom.

**Be more than a name online.** If you think you may someday want a letter of recommendation from a particular professor, take at least one of their courses

in a face-to-face format rather than in an online format. Face-to-face interactions are more memorable. Know that it is harder for you to make a lasting impression on a professor through an online class. We cannot as easily sense your attention to a course or the energy and enthusiasm you bring to the learning experience in online classes because we only get to know your personality through discussion posts, written assignments, and the occasional e-mail. When taking online courses, be sure to come to our office hours to help make a lasting, positive impression.

**Be seen around the department.** Come to office hours to seek feedback on how to improve your performance or to discuss your personal career planning. Impress upon your professors that you are interested in and curious about issues and

7. **Optional but recommended additions** to this portfolio include your Graduate Record Examination score report if you have it and a high-quality writing sample, preferably from a course taken with the professor to whom you are delivering this portfolio.

Provide the portfolio to letter writers at least 3 weeks in advance of the first deadline date. Be watchful to avoid school breaks, weekends, and holidays when they may not receive the materials or may not write your letter because they are vacation-bound. Paper documents collected in a ring binder may be preferred by some professors, so ask about their preferences. However, converting all documents to electronic form makes for easier transfer and access on any device. Provide a neat, organized appearance for this portfolio to make a positive impression.

### Follow Up With Your Letter Writers

Two weeks before each deadline, e-mail a reminder to your letter writers; don't be shy, it really does help us remember to get your letter submitted on time. Also follow up with each graduate program by contacting their office to ensure that the letters of recommendation arrived as expected and that your application package is complete. Keep in touch with your letter

writers. Whether or not you were accepted, they are interested in what you are doing. After all letters have been submitted, send a hand-written note of thanks to each of your letter writers. Do not thank them via e-mail because your heartfelt gratitude for this student-faculty partnership is better expressed through old-fashioned manners like a personal hand-written note or thank you card.

To be a part of a student's success is a very special, intangible reward for your professors. Help them know what an excellent student you are because they want to write the very best letter of recommendation for you that they can. They want to support your advancement and success.

We have discussed how to properly request letters of recommendation—and how not to request them—with specific instructions and suggestions from some experienced professors. Following this advice should greatly increase your probability of getting the job or getting accepted to the graduate school of your dreams.

### References

- American Psychological Association. (2007). *Getting in: A step-by-step plan for gaining admission to graduate school in psychology* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- American Psychological Association. (2015). *Graduate study in psychology*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Buskist, W., & Burke, C. (2007). *Preparing for graduate study in psychology: 101 questions and answers* (2nd ed.). Malden, MA:

- Blackwell Publishing.
- Keith-Spiegel, P., & Wiederman, M. W. (2000). *The complete guide to graduate school admission: Psychology, counseling, and related professions* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Norcross, J. C., & Sayette, M. A. (2014). *Insider's guide to graduate programs in clinical and counseling psychology*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Wilson, D. W. (2000). It takes more than good grades! Some straight talk about how to get strong letters of recommendation from faculty. *Eye on Psi Chi*, 2(2), 11–13. Retrieved from <https://www.psichi.org/?page=022EyeWin98aWilson>



**John Gomez, PhD**, teaches, mentors, and conducts research with undergraduate students in psychology at Our Lady of the Lake University (OLLU) in San Antonio, Texas. His research program and teaching focus upon helping undergraduate

students to think strategically about their future professional selves and their professional career. He has taught Preparing for Graduate School at OLLU since 2012, an online psychology elective course about academic self-preparation for undergraduates, graduate school decision-making, and career planning in psychology. He has also taught a university-based GRE preparation course since 2008 to students representing more than 20 majors on campus. His courses are two components of the OLLU Psychology Department's graduate-school-preparatory curriculum, which also includes research- and pre-practice-based concentrations within the major and coursework designed to enhance the necessary knowledge base and skill set for self-preparation for graduate studies. OLLU students and faculty maintain an active Psi Chi chapter, which has hosted two regional Psi Chi research conferences. For more information about OLLU's curriculum model, please visit [www.ollu.edu](http://www.ollu.edu) or contact Dr. John Gomez at [jpgomez@ollu.edu](mailto:jpgomez@ollu.edu).

questions in the field. Actively participate in Psi Chi local chapter activities. Look for opportunities to work with faculty on their projects, research or otherwise.

### Exhibit Desirable Interpersonal Behaviors

**Be dependable.** Show up for class, appointments, and events on time. Meet deadlines and complete tasks as they were assigned.

**Be self-confident but modest.** Accept and respond constructively to suggestions, criticism, evaluative feedback, and supervision. Always show a desire for self-improvement and personal growth. Show an overall positive attitude about school, classes, psychology, and learning in general.

**Be polished and mature.** In the presence

of a potential letter writer, remember that every interaction is a professional interaction. Professors as letter writers also assess your interpersonal skills, verbal ability, and professional maturity. Avoid undesirable interpersonal behavior such as silliness, humor in bad taste, arrogance, and hostility. Always demonstrate professionalism, respect, and show perfect manners. Professors will not say it but we are watching you and keeping mental notes at all times. We know that one day you may ask us for a letter of recommendation.

### Seek a Mentor(s)

The single largest contributor to preparedness for graduate school is your interactions with faculty members at your undergraduate institution (Norcross & Sayette, 2014). The best way to get to know

your professors better—and to position yourself to ask them to write letters of recommendation—is to work with them in some context outside of the classroom such as in a research context or by your active membership in Psi Chi. By working closely with you outside of the classroom, faculty gain an accurate picture of the kind of graduate student you may become. Having a mentor to advise you in your growth as a student and a future psychologist is invaluable. There is no better way to learn about the vast world of psychology than in a one-on-one mentoring relationship.

### Plan ahead

You will need letters of recommendation in the near future, so help your professors right now to remember what a great student you are.