

Requesting Letters of Recommendation



November 2020

A good letter of recommendation can make or break your postgraduate application and should not be overlooked. We break down who an ideal referee is and how to ask for a letter of recommendation.

Who is an ideal referee?

Here are attributes that make an ideal referee for your LOR. You can read more at the [FindAPhD blog](#).

1. Someone who knows you well

Your referee should be someone who has worked closely with you. Specific reference letters, which get noticed more than generic ones, can only be written by a referee who knows you well. Choose someone who you worked with for a long time over a renowned professor who only gave you a lecture once.

2. Someone competent in your field

Select people who are qualified to evaluate and can vouch your writing, analysis, and research skills, as well as your ability to handle the work expected from a graduate student. Your referees could include people who know you from various perspectives, for example your professor could highlight your strengths as a student and your previous boss could highlight your work ethic.

3. Someone who likes you

None of your professors may actively dislike you, but some will be warmer towards you than others. Do not be afraid to choose people who like you as referees.

4. Someone who is prepared

Writing a good letter of recommendation takes effort and time. Your referee will spend hours going through your background, CV, and career plan, and in preparing the letter. Ask your potential referee if they if they could write a strong letter of recommendation for you. If they cannot, pick someone else.

5. Someone with no conflict of interest

Your references should be (or at least appear to be) genuine and objective. Avoid choosing referees who may be perceived to be in favor of you, such as family members or friends. On the flipside, ensure that your referee supports your decision to pursue graduate studies. For example, if your boss wants you to stay at your position, they might be conflicted in the type of reference letter they write.

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How do you request a letter of recommendation?

- 1. Make a list** - List those who met your criteria. Go through them and imagine how they might respond when asked about you. If you doubt whether they would support you, remove them from your list.
- 2. Contact them early** - Contact your potential referees early, ideally months in advance, to give them time to prepare a thoughtful and distinctive letter of recommendation. This will also give you time to ask someone else in case they decline.
- 3. Highlight their qualifications** – When reaching out, explain why you chose your potential referee to vouch for you in your application and why she is uniquely qualified to accurately assess and communicate your competence.
- 4. Provide information about yourself** - Your referees should understand your work, interests, and plans to allow them to write a specific letter of recommendation. Share the following with your referees:
 - Papers you completed for the referee's class (or details of your work experience with the referee)
 - Updated resume and/or transcript
 - Description of your career interests and aspiration, or a Statement of Purpose.
 - Any extenuating circumstances that may be notable (e.g. financial difficulties in school, etc.)
- 5. Provide information about the program** - Your referees can only tailor the letter to a specific audience if they understand the program you are applying. Share the following with your referees:
 - Description of the program and school to which you are applying.
 - Application forms and materials, with the relevant portions pre-filled.
- 6. Offer to provide a template** – some professors may ask to be provided with a template. A template, whether an outline or even a complete draft, can make it simpler for your referees and ensures that important information that you would like included are in the letter.
- 7. "No Questions Asked"** - When reaching out to referees, allow them to decline your request for any or no reason, no questions asked. If they do agree, allow them to change, modify, or edit your letter or the template as they see fit.
- 8. Follow-up** - Check that the letter has arrived by the deadline. If not, contact the referee.
- 9. Send a thank-you note.** - Referees can spend hours writing a letter of recommendation and it is important to acknowledge this. Don't forget to let the referee know whether you got the position.

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Do's and don'ts

Dos

- Ask more persons for letters of recommendation than the minimum number you need.
- Ask permission to list a someone's name as a referee on an application.
- Meet your potential referee to discuss your request for a letter of recommendation.
- Remind the referee to use their official or work email if the letter will be sent via email.
- Waive your right to see the recommendation if given the chance.
- After the letter of recommendation has been sent, write a letter thanking the referee

Don'ts

- Don't assume your potential referee is willing to write a letter
- Don't harass referees to see whether they have sent the letter yet. You may request the referee to inform you if the letter is sent or send a follow-up email close to the deadline.
- Don't hold up submitting your application while waiting for your referees to submit their letters.

Further Reading:

- [5 Things That Make an Awesome Referee for Your PhD Application by Gaia Cantelli \(FindAPhD\)](#)
- [How to Ask for a Reference Letter by Jodi Glickman \(Harvard Business Review\)](#)
- [How to Choose References for Grad School by Deborah Vieyra \(ProFellow\)](#)
- [How to Find Good References \(University of Calgary Faculty of Graduate Studies\)](#)
- [Obtaining Letters of Recommendation \(Mayfield Electronic Handbook of Technical & Scientific Writing\)](#)
- [Recommendation Letter Etiquette \(Seattle Pacific University\)](#)
- [Which referees should I choose for my postgraduate application? \(TargetJobs\)](#)