How to Help Your Students Select the Best Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendations can be mailed, e-mailed or faxed directly from the letter writer to the graduate admissions office. You can mail the letters with your other application materials so long as the letters are in sealed envelopes with the letter writer's signature across the flap.

A Letter of Recommendation is a letter that makes a statement of support for a candidate. This letter should present a well-documented evaluation, providing sufficient evidence and information to help an admissions committee get a better picture of you and your potential.

Nearly every graduate program requires applicants to submit letters of recommendation. Do not underestimate the importance of these letters.

The best letters of recommendation come from professors or individuals who know you well. A well written letter of recommendation provides admissions committees with information that isn't found elsewhere in the application. A letter of recommendation discusses applicant's personal qualities, accomplishments and experiences that make him/her unique and perfect for the programs to which he/she is applying.

Selection committees normally weed out mediocre application packets before focusing on the excellent ones. This means that a brief letter with phrases like "good student" and "hard worker" that aren't substantiated with examples will get tossed aside in favor of the detailed letter that doesn't just tell but shows how qualified the student is. Remember, what makes a student's application packet stand out from the others are not only grades and accomplishments, but the specifics of what the student did and how he or she went about it.

General Outline of the Statement of Purpose

The Statement of Purpose should present a vibrant and original picture of your character and aspirations and most importantly, leave a positive and lasting impression in the minds of the admissions committee.

Step 1 Determine the focus of your statement of purpose

The goal of the statement of purpose is to persuade the admissions committee to choose you for their program. Whatever focus you choose, it must be clear and supported by examples throughout the entire essay. As you start to construct your personal statement, answer the questions below in a paragraph or two. These will help you decide what to focus on in your statement.

1. Why do you want to attend graduate school? (knowledge, money, prestige, etc.)
2. What research experiences have you had if any? (both formal and informal)
3. What are some topics that you think you might want to research?
4. What’s special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story? What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the admissions committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?

5. What are your career goals?

6. What is your ideal vision of the future?

7. When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?

8. How have you learned about this field – through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?

9. Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?

10. What skills (for example leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?

11. If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?

Step 2 Determine the contents of your statement

- Prepare an outline by selecting the main topics you want to cover and list supporting statements under each topic.
- Remember, that while information on your past work is important, it is most relevant to point out its connection to your interest in this particular field of study. The admission committee is primarily concerned with your current and future interests and aspirations.

Step 3 Organize your statement

Opening paragraph – Introduce yourself and give your general reasons for pursuing graduate study. Grab their attention by stating particular talents that make you an individual they should consider.

Body – Build your foundation for your forthcoming work

- Explain why you chose this field.
- Explain your expertise and accomplishments in your field, including research (mention the project name and professor that you worked with).
- Talk about your undergraduate studies in general and how they relate to what you want to do in graduate school (do not list specifics that are contained in transcripts).
- Describe other relevant experiences (volunteer, organizations, jobs, etc.) and be sure to include names and other important details.
Explain why these various experiences demonstrate your motivation and inspiration for continued study.
Briefly explain any discrepancies on your transcript. No details are necessary.
Mention specific faculty you are interested in working with (make sure they are still at that university).

*Background* – Tell them about yourself. Describe your family and community (or a community in which you once lived). Did someone influence you to pursue higher education or a particular career goal? Give examples of personal attributes or qualities you know will help you successfully complete graduate school. For example, describe your determination, initiative, creativity, capacity to solve problems, ability to develop ideas and work with people, etc. Be sure to back these up with facts.

*Closing paragraph* – Finally, leave the reader with a strong sense that you are qualified and will be successful in graduate school. Briefly summarize highlights and close strong.

*Step 4 Write, read, rewrite...*

- After writing you first draft, set it aside. In the meantime read as many sample statements as you can, while paying attention to how good statements differ from bad ones.
- After a day or so, reread your draft. If it still sounds good, make basic changes and additions according to what you have learned from the sample statements and go to the next step. If not, rewrite it.

*Step 5 Distribute, analyze, rewrite...*

- Put your draft away for a day or two, and then reread it again.
- Make changes, and then proofread (yes, again).
- Now it’s time to send or give your statement to all your friends. The more people who read your statement, the more comments and ideas you will receive.
- The more drafts you do, the more refined your statement will be. The time and energy that you put into this activity should result in a personal statement that can be used, with minor modifications, for each university and/or scholarship to which you apply.