

## Episode 21 – Getting the Most Out of Your Grad School Application Letters of Recommendation

Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

We continue our trek through your graduate application, which should be due sometime in December or January for most programs starting next Fall, and even earlier for programs starting in January. In [Episode 16](#) we discussed undergraduate research as your grad application superpower, which you should have started already this term if not last year. In [Episode 17](#) we talked about those cold emails to faculty begging them to take you into their research group – short synopsis: Don't Do It! In [Episode 18](#) we talked about boosting your GPA followed by an episode especially for international applicants in [Episode 19](#) on how to narrow down your search of US graduate schools. And in Episode 20 Dr. Vicki Johnson gave us some fabulous advice on how to fund your advanced degree through fellowships and scholarships. Which brings us to today's topic: those dreaded letters of recommendation.

I say "dreaded" not because they are unpleasant, but because they require a lot of work and forethought on your part. So, let's break that workload into the following tasks in the form of questions:

- Whom do I ask?
- How do I ask them?
- What do they need from me?
- When should I start?

There's a lot of good information online for many of these questions, but there's also a lot of bad advice. Let's start with some general resources, then I'll add some personal perspective on each of these questions that you can add to your Tik Tok and Reddit research.

The [National Name Exchange hosted by the Council of Graduate Schools](#) has some great resources in general for applying to graduate school. Specific to letters of recommendation, I recommend (pun intended) the following resources:

[Wordvice](#) has templates and examples of recommendation letters, and [Rice University](#) Graduate School has some nice tips for requesting letters. There are certainly others, and you should always check the grad school you are submitting to for their own resources.

You'll find all these links in the transcript to today's episode on grad-post.com, but Google works, too.

On to our questions! The first three questions: whom do I ask, how do I ask them and what do they need from me are all pretty intertwined. So, let's start with the last question first, because the answer is simple. When should I start thinking about asking for letters of recommendation? Answer: yesterday. It's never too early to start asking faculty if they will write you a letter. They typically will set aside some time to write multiple recommendation letters, but that time may not be until weeks from now. They write letters for undergrads applying to grad school and to certain types of jobs; they write letters for grad students applying for faculty positions, postdoc positions, and certain jobs; they write letters for tenure review cases for faculty at other institutions; they write letters of recommendation for colleagues applying for administrative positions at other universities. All this is to say that they write a lot of letters and tend to do them in chunks, like one evening a week or on a weekend. The good news in all of this is that they are accustomed to writing recommendation letters, so it is rare that you will be told "no" – more on this in a minute – but you may have to wait weeks to get the letter, so plan ahead. At a minimum, give them **four**

**to six weeks** ahead of the deadline to submit the letter. In a pinch, you could ask them two weeks ahead, but if you tell them it's due tomorrow expect a very curt "no."

Which is a good segue into whom to ask. Yes, there are grumpy old professors who are probably scary and purposely off-putting, but don't count them out as letter writers. Sure, it's easier to ask that cool first year professor you have for your favorite class, but chances are you don't have three of those people to ask. Plus, that first year professor may not have as much experience writing the letter. Just make sure that you ask faculty members. Don't ask your mom, your boss from Walgreens for that summer job you had in high school, your track coach, or your kindergarten teacher. You want people who can speak honestly to your potential in graduate school. That might be a recent employer or supervisor if that job was an internship in your disciplinary field and they attended grad schools themselves, but make sure they are comfortable speaking to your academic abilities, not just that you showed up to work on time and worked well with others. Those are important skills, but they don't carry a lot of weight with admissions review committees.

A good recommendation letter will typically start with how long they've known you and in what capacity. Don't be concerned if that's only two years and they had you in one class. That's par for the course. They will describe your academic performance in that class, probably stating your letter grade (which is already on your transcript) and maybe even where you finished in the course ranking like 10<sup>th</sup> out of 52 (yes – faculty do this stuff.) They may give some specifics on how you did in the class, like improving with each test score, submitting all your homework on time, participating in group discussions, and so on. If they were the instructor for a large lecture the likelihood of detailed comments goes down. Which is why you really want to ask leaders of smaller classes if possible. They are more likely to remember you. This faculty member may also make a comment on your overall GPA with respect to the department's major GPA. This is important context. We all know that grade inflation is rampant, but some undergraduate programs do try to keep things in check, so comments like "their GPA is well above the average for our major" are important. They may be able to comment on honors and awards you received and your participation in student organizations. Try to get faculty leaders of those organizations you were in and even members of the awards committee if you know who they were. Finally, a good letter will mention something about your preparedness for graduate school. This is where their experience in writing letters is most impactful. They can say things like "Our department routinely sends 20% of our seniors to graduate school, and I put Arianna in the top half of those students we send." They may even be willing to tailor a letter or two to your top program with comparisons to other students they know have gone there recently. And if you really want a tailored letter, ask a faculty member who went to the grad school you are applying to. Ideally, they would have had you in class, but this is an instance where there's enough overlap in personal interests that they may be willing to write you a letter. There's nothing like school spirit and nostalgia to get someone to think about what they are writing. You also want people who might be familiar with a barrier you overcame or how you worked in diverse groups. You may need to feed them some of this information, which brings us to what you need to give them.

Be prepared to send everything they will need in your formal email request. This will be the name of the program, the name of the institution, a link to where to send the letter – unless it will be automatically generated and sent to them – and an up-to-date resume. They probably have access to a transcript, but if you can get an unofficial copy easily it will save them time. Finally, be sure to prompt them with some items you'd like highlighted in the letter, like president of this club, student-athlete, first generation college student, overcoming economic barriers, prestigious scholarship winner, internship at a company or non-profit, as well as your career aspirations. Give them more than you think they'll need and don't be shy about highlighting your accomplishments. Don't brag, and definitely don't make things up, but be

sure to tell them about things that are important to you. Chances are not all of it will end up in the letter, and there's a chance that none of it will, but most good letter writers will try to insert one bit of information in the letter that makes you stand apart. Can you get a negative letter of recommendation even from a professor who seemed cordial to you? Absolutely. If you finished dead last in the class and barely squeaked by with a D-, they are likely to say so. They will hopefully balance that factual information with some intangibles like you "showed improvement" or you "worked hard to pass", but don't expect someone to say you were the model student when you skipped class half the time. This is where providing context can be very helpful to the letter writer.

Finally, how do you ask them? There are a couple ways to approach this, and it depends a lot on where this person is in proximity to you. If you are going to ask a professor you have for a class right now, start with an informal request by approaching them after class – not before - and simply asking them if they are willing to write a letter for you. If it is a faculty member you had in a class previously and you are both regularly on campus, try dropping by their office for the informal request. It helps them put a face to a name. Keep the request brief and thank them for their time. In both cases, tell them you will follow up with an email that same day with all the information they need, the deadline, and where the link will come from if the letter request is automatically generated by the school you are applying to. This is your formal request mentioned earlier. You may get an additional request from the faculty member, like remind me in two weeks, or give me a hardcopy of your resume, so try to honor reasonable requests and work with them. Nine times out of ten you will get a positive response to your informal request, even from that crusty old professor you thought would kick you out of their office. If they say "You should probably ask someone else," or "I don't think I could write an effective letter for you," then believe them. You might be able to guilt them into writing you one if you press them, but that's not really the letter you want.

There is the occasional problem with a letter writer who won't submit the letter. There can be a lot of reasons for this, so don't jump to conclusions that they don't like you or are just jerks. Both of those things could be true, but it's more likely that something unexpected came up. Faculty members have parents, grandparents, families, pets, mortgages to pay, and weddings to plan. Life happens to them, too. So, be prepared to cut them some slack. A gentle email reminder ten days before the letter deadline – which may or may not be the same as the application deadline – should get a response. But if you are being ghosted by this person who told you they would write a letter, then be prepared to move on. It's always a good idea to have a backup plan. Do you need to ask four people if you only need three letters? No. There's no use wasting someone's time. But as a last resort, go to the department chair or school dean if the program is small enough and explain your situation. You will probably get a knowing nod from them when you mention the faculty member's name and you are likely adding to a long list of complaints they are collecting on this individual. But for you, they will probably be willing to write a letter on your behalf, even if they don't know you. Promoting their undergraduates is part of their job. It may not be the most detailed letter in the world, but if you prompt them as described earlier they will help you out in a pinch. Most academic administrators are surprisingly accommodating people. I didn't say nice – I said accommodating. They don't keep their jobs for long if they are not and they are used to putting out fires. Seek their counsel if your application letters are ablaze.

To end on a positive note, the letter writing part of your application can actually be the most fulfilling one. Having a faculty member write a letter for you validates that you are ready for graduate school. It means that someone noticed you and your work. It means that they care about your success. Isn't that what we all want?

Thank you for joining me today. All of the links provided in my podcasts are available at [grad-post.com](http://grad-post.com). There, you'll find additional resources and information to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree.

Every degree counts and your letters of recommendation are often the deciding factor in providing the opportunity for that degree.

#### Links

<https://cgsnet.org/data-insights/diversity-equity-inclusiveness/national-name-exchange/national-name-exchange-for-students/nne-student-resources#AnE>

<https://blog.wordvice.com/graduate-school-recommendation-letter-templates-and-examples/>

<https://graduate.rice.edu/news/current-news/grad-applications-101-getting-letters-rec>