

Letters of Evaluation: What Students Should Know

With today's tight competition for admission to health professional schools, chances are that you are only one of many candidates with test scores and grades that qualify for admission or scholarships. Letters of evaluation can document special qualities which differentiate you from other applicants.

Letters of evaluation provide

1. Information-describe things about you that are not measured by grades or tests;
2. Evaluation-provides judgment of how you measure up in comparison to others; and,
3. Characterization-creates a vivid image distinguishing you from others.

Producing good letters of evaluation is a job for both the applicant and letter writer. Before you decide who should write your letters of evaluation, you must decide what it is that you would like to have written about you. *Good letters do not just happen*, they are generally the result of a plan. You are responsible for that plan.

Decide what you would like to be said about you. Start by identifying the information which is likely to be of particular importance to your potential professional school or scholarship funding agency. These differ, of course, depending on the purpose of the application. Carefully study the application or brochure to understand what the program is looking for in applicants and on what criteria applicant selection will be based. Group these criteria under three headings:

- Educational achievement
- Work experience
- Personality characteristics

Then identify more specifically your characteristics and traits which should appear in your letters of evaluation: Which of your work and educational experiences should be described? In what specific ways do your academic background, test scores, and resume need to be supplemented, explained or emphasized? What statements about you and your experience are better made by someone other than yourself?

How to select a writer of a letter

Too many students simply ask themselves, "Who do I know that knows me well enough to write a letter?" and then proceed to request a letter from the first person whose name pops into their head. A "perfect" person to write a letter on your behalf would be someone who:

- knows you well in many ways, including those of particular importance to the employer or graduate school;
- knows a great deal about the particular place to which you are applying and the kind of work or study which you are seeking;
- has good comparative judgment based on knowing a large number of students or young persons well;
- is well-known to the school as someone whose judgment should be given weight;
- has a favorable judgment of you.

Generally, you will have to compromise in your selection of a letter writer – picking some strengths over others which are less important. Fortunately, you can choose more than one author and can select several who know you in different contexts and whose letters will fulfill different strategic needs (teachers, employers, administrators, etc.).

In addition to letters from professors, you should also solicit for your personal file letters from former employers and supervisors on jobs, paid or volunteer, you have held. This includes committee work and any other extracurricular activity. By accumulating these short letters each year, you can document your prior experience. If you determine that you do not want to apply to professional school immediately upon graduation, it becomes all the more important to have a substantial file.

How to ask someone to write a letter

Ask early. Do not delay too long in making your choice of writers. Most letter writers are busy people and need as much time as possible in which to schedule writing your letter.

You may be in the dark as to someone's writing skills; but you cannot afford to be in the dark concerning their judgment of you. The chance that the letter will not be favorable is a chance you cannot afford to take. The best way to find out how you stand with the prospective letter writer is to ask. A possible approach might be: "Professor Jones, I am applying for an American Heart Association Fellowship. Do you feel that I would be a strong candidate?" or "Do you feel you could recommend me for admission to UCLA Dental School?"

Helping the Letter Writer

First, you should make it clear what it is you are applying for. Provide the writer with a copy of a description of the program or fellowship, together with your statement of purpose. This helps to assure that the letter will be consistent with your own application. The second thing you should give the writer is a checklist of facts or incidents in your relationship with her/him which will refresh her/his memory of you. Letters with specific examples of your strong points are much more persuasive than letters which merely abound in adjectives. Your letter writers are apt to have sound conclusions about your abilities and characteristics, but it might be hard for them to recall the precise incidents which lead to those conclusions. You can help:

- If the letter writer is a professor, the checklist you provide should include the title of the course (you might then include a copy of a particularly good paper to refresh the letter writer's memory).
- If the letter will illustrate supervisory capabilities or creative power, itemize specific incidents which you know the writer will recall when brought to mind.

You must remember that your letter writer may have known hundreds of students and will be grateful for an aid to trigger her/his memory.

Follow Through

You should give the writer stamped envelopes properly addressed. Make sure that the deadline for sending the letter is understood. It is ultimately YOUR responsibility to see that

the letter is written and reaches its destination. This is particularly important as many offices have a practice of not processing your application until the file is “complete” including the required number of letters of recommendation.

Notify letter writers of outcome

It is courteous to notify those who write letters on your behalf of the outcome of your application, whether favorable or not. This provides another occasion to express your thanks and maintain a continuing relationship-one which may permit you to again ask for help.

Your file on yourself

Maintaining a file on yourself containing copies of applications, transcripts, previous letters of evaluation, and lists of potential writers will help you with future applications. With this material in hand, half the job of arranging the next good set of letters is already accomplished.

Additional Suggestions

1. It would be very helpful to provide all letter writers with a brief vita of your extracurricular and summer work experiences listed in chronological order by year. A completed “advisee activity record” provided by your advisor would suffice. This should be updated annually.
2. It is also useful to provide your writers with an unofficial copy of your transcript or authorize them access to a copy of your transcript from the registrar’s office.
3. Applications and envelopes should be typed and the student should retain photocopies of all completed applications and supporting materials. Departmental envelopes can be obtained from your letter writers.