Getting Great Recommendation Letters

This handout summarizes some key information about how to get great letters of recommendation. Please be aware that these are just general guidelines –not all will apply to every situation, and you will need to think carefully about the purpose of the recommendations (graduate school application, fellowship, job, etc.) and develop an appropriate strategy.

THE ROLE OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation letters are typically one component of a larger application package, which may also include transcripts, test scores, statements of purpose, and a resume. Before asking for recommendation letters, you should consider the purpose and scope of the opportunity, and determine what types of recommendations would be most appropriate and helpful in convincing the reviewer that you are the best fit for this opportunity.

For instance, typical graduate school applications require the following elements:

- **Statement(s) of Purpose:** an opportunity for you to explain your preparation for graduate study and how you "fit" with the goals and opportunities of the institution to which you are applying
- **Resume/CV:** an opportunity for you to describe research, work and volunteer experiences, as well as honors, publications, etc.
- **Transcripts and Test Scores:** a detailed summary of your academic performance and potential
- **Recommendations:** typically 3 letters, at least 2 of which should come from faculty

You should think strategically about your recommendation letters, and how they can be used to highlight your strengths and fill in any "gaps" that may not be covered by your resume or transcripts. Some positive elements that you may want to have highlighted in your application materials and/or recommendation letters include:

- **Research experience** (volunteer or paid work in a lab; independent study with a faculty; extensive research or design projects completed as part of coursework; research or problem solving skills developed through internships or work experience)
- **Industry experience** (volunteer or paid internships; opportunities to solve problems, test equipment, investigate materials, give presentations, work in a team, etc.)
- **Leadership experience** (serving as an officer in student organizations; organizing an event or activity; leading a research or project team, etc.)
- **Teamwork skills** (working effectively with others to solve problems or complete projects; leading a team; solving interpersonal problems; effective communications, etc.)
- **Communication skills** (giving oral presentations; developing written reports or materials; generating web content, blogs, or social media posts; interpersonal communications, etc.)

CHOOSING RECOMMENDERS

Ideally, you will ask for recommendation letters from individuals who both **know you well** and **can write effectively** [1]. Faculty, advisers, internship/work supervisors, coaches and individuals who have supervised your volunteer or extracurricular activities can all make good choices.

Faculty are used to having students ask them for recommendations, and are generally happy to assist. However, a generic recommendation letter from someone who does not know you well may do more harm than good – in this case, "faint praise" [2] from a faculty who can only say that you attended class and earned a 4.0 is not particularly valuable, while a graduate student with whom you've spent months conducting research may be able to write a strong, detailed letter that is highly valuable, even though the writer doesn't (yet) have a PhD. Generally, it is not appropriate to ask family members or very close friends to provide recommendations.

In considering whether a particular recommender can write an effective letter, consider the following criteria (adapted from [3]):

- Is the recommender aware of your field of interest and the schools/jobs/programs you are applying to?
- Is the recommender able to evaluate your performance in your field of interest?
- Is the recommender able to discuss your personal characteristics?
- Is the recommender able to discuss your capacity to work with others?
- Can the recommender discuss your leadership skills?
- Can the recommender evaluate your level of professionalism (e.g., punctuality, efficiency, assertiveness)?
- Can the recommender discuss your academic skills -- not simply experience, but evaluate your potential to succeed in graduate-level study or the workplace?
- Does the recommender evaluate you positively relative to others of similar capabilities (i.e., how does the recommender rate you in comparison to your peers)?
- Is the recommender a recognized expert in the field, and is the recommender's judgment highly valued within the field?
- Is the recommender able to write a good reference letter (i.e., literate, coherent, topical)

While an individual recommender may not meet all of these criteria, if an individual meets few or no items on this list then he or she may not be the most effective recommender for you. Common types of recommenders include:

- Faculty who have been your teachers
- Faculty, post-docs or graduate students who have supervised your research
- Faculty or advisers who have supervised your leadership or volunteer activities
- Supervisors from your professional internships and jobs
- Community leaders whom you have worked with on outreach or volunteer activities

HOW TO ASK FOR A RECOMMENDATION

Ask for recommendations at least 3-6 weeks in advance of the deadline; asking earlier than that is okay, but you should also follow up closer to the deadline.

When you ask for a recommendation, ask specifically: "Would you be comfortable writing me a strong letter of recommendation?"[4]. While most faculty and supervisors will agree to provide a letter, if you specifically ask for a strong recommendation then you may hear back that some individuals don't feel they could write you the strongest possible letter for this particular opportunity. This is not necessarily a reflection on you and your abilities – often the potential recommender is just acknowledging that they don't know you or your abilities well enough to provide a strong letter of support, or that they don't have sufficient time or skill to develop the strongest possible letter for you. If the person you ask for a recommendation declines, you should thank them for their consideration.

If the person you ask for a recommendation agrees to provide a letter, you should thank them and follow up with written details about what is required for the letter (deadline, submission instructions, content, etc.). You should also include a brief description of what you are applying for, drafts of any application materials, and your current resume or CV.

In order to make sure that your recommendation letters complement you r other application materials, it is wise to ask each recommender to highlight specific aspects of their interactions with you. For instance, you might ask your research mentor to emphasize your experiences in the lab, ask another faculty mentor to talk about your academic abilities, and ask the faculty adviser from your student professional society to talk about your leadership skills and outreach activities.

Often, it is helpful to provide a few bullet points for each recommender, reminding him/her of key experiences, dates, and details that may be appropriate for the recommendation letter. **DO NOT PROVIDE EXACTLY THE SAME LANGUAGE TO EACH RECOMMENDER.** It is fairly common for recommenders to take language from your bullet points and integrate it into their letter, and you don't want all of the recommendations to use identical language. The specific information you provide to your recommenders will depend on what you want them to emphasize in their letter, and what they know about you; the following examples outline some common types of information that may be helpful for you to provide to various recommenders; you can find additional ideas at [5].

Relationship and Roles: how and when did you meet the recommender? What were your respective roles? What projects, classes, etc., did you work on? Examples of how to describe this information in bullet points include:
- I met you in Fall 2010 when I enrolled in your computer programming course; I came to your office hours to talk about an honors option and ended up volunteering in your lab to work on educational interface design.
- After volunteering for two semesters, you hired me to work in the lab full-time in Summer 2011. I worked on a project studying ways to integrate scaffolding into educational software for middle school science students.

- You introduced me to Dr. Smith in Fall 2011 and encouraged me to pursue a research project in her lab this year, focusing on handheld interfaces.

Academic Abilities: what information does the recommender have to assess your academic potential? Include coursework, special projects, honors, etc., as appropriate. For example:
- I am a member of the Honors College and worked with you on two honors options, in CSE 231 and 232 (Fall 2010 and Spring 2011).
- I am pursuing dual bachelor's degrees in computer science and in political theory & constitutional democracy, with a 3.6 / 4.0 cumulative GPA; I've been on the Dean's list every semester since Fall 2009.
- I won a Distinguished Freshman scholarship (full-ride to MSU for four years) and was named the top CSE undergraduate my junior year.

Professional Experience: how have you demonstrated competency and excellence in a professional setting? What projects did you work on? What training did you complete? What were the outcomes of your work? For instance:
- I interned with the AS/400 Network Transport team during summer 2009.
- I was asked to update the testing manual for the new TCP/IP protocols, to be released in early 2010, and generated over 5,000 test cases during the three month summer internship.
- I completed eight hours of training in professional ethics and standards as part of the IBM internship program, and participated in a day-long seminar on educational technologies for adult learners.

Research Experience: consider both paid and volunteer experiences, as well as substantial research projects completed as part of your technical coursework. Include descriptions of the project and your role and describe the research skills you developed, specialized software or equipment you used, and how your work contributed to a larger research project. For instance:
- I began working in the HCI lab in Fall 2010, when I completed an honors option with Dr. Jones. My role was to collect and analyze user data using Excel and SPSS.
- After learning how to gather and analyze statistical information about users' interactions with the software, I developed a new study of two interface alternatives, which were tested in Summer 2011.
- I presented my research as a poster at the 2011 Summer Undergraduate Research Forum, and contributed to a paper that was presented at CHI 2012.

Teaching Experience: what were your responsibilities? What class(es) did you assist with? How many students did you work with, and who was your faculty supervisor? How did you demonstrate leadership and effective communications? Examples include:
- I was a teaching assistant for CSE 101 during my senior year, working with a graduate student instructor and assisting in three sections of 20 student each week.
- I assisted in grading bi-weekly exams and projects, and provided support in the help room 5 hours per week.
- I developed a new supplemental module on Excel for use in the help room, and gave an in-class lecture on using Excel for tracking business expenses.

Outreach and Service: emphasize STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) outreach programs or activities you have participated in, describing the audience (e.g,. K-12 students, high school teachers) and activity. For example:

- As part of the executive board of SWE (Society of Women Engineers), I helped to organize weekly outreach activities with students at Dwight Rich Middle School in Lansing, Michigan. I coordinated the efforts of about 10 college students, who volunteered as math and science tutors for about 30 middle school students each week.
- During my senior year, I was elected president of our SWE section and had the opportunity to represent MSU at the national conference. I also arranged a retreat for the executive board to build teamwork and communications skills, and secured funding from Dow Chemical for this event.

REFERENCES

[1] "How to Get a Recommendation Letter," *About.com Graduate School*. [Online]. Available: http://gradschool.about.com/od/askingforletters/ht/howletter.htm. [Accessed: 21-Oct-2012].

[2] R. M. Reis, "Getting Great Letters of Recommendation," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 02-Feb-2001.

[3] "Recommendation Letters: Choosing Referees," *About.com Graduate School*. [Online]. Available: http://gradschool.about.com/od/askingforletters/a/askrec.htm. [Accessed: 21-Oct-2012].

[4] M. Might, "Asking for a letter of recommendation." [Online]. Available: http://matt.might.net/articles/how-to-recommendation-letter/. [Accessed: 21-Oct-2012].

[5] M. D. Jackson, "How to Get the Best Recommendation Letters for Grad School Article - GradSchools.com." [Online]. Available: http://www.gradschools.com/article-detail/getting-recommendations-116. [Accessed: 21-Oct-2012].