

# A Student's Guide to Obtaining Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation should directly and specifically support your application for admission to professional or graduate school. The letters should focus upon those areas that directly pertain to your potential to succeed in a graduate program or within a profession. Professional schools typically require letters from faculty only, or faculty and professionals. Academic graduate programs typically require letters from faculty and researchers only. Be sure to check each school or program's requirements to see who the letters should be from, and how many letters you will need to submit. In all cases, however, the letters should be from people who know you well and can write about your academic and/or professional strengths and accomplishments with detail and specificity.

Unless specifically required, general character letters are of limited or no value to most admissions committees.

## ESTABLISHING FACULTY CONTACT

Establish contact with your instructors early in your college career. A conscientious, deliberate attempt to know and be known by faculty members in your major field of study will bring about greater opportunities for obtaining substantive and specific letters of support for graduate or professional school admission. Letters of recommendation from faculty are more meaningful when based upon their personal knowledge of your abilities and performance as generated through a **mutual interest** or **shared academic or learning activity**. Some admissions committees also welcome letters from faculty in areas outside your major. There are a number of strategies for pursuing faculty contact, such as:

- **Course Selection** - Consider selecting courses with small class sizes to maximize personal contact with professors and enrolling in subsequent courses offered by the same professor. If qualified, apply for departmental honors or research programs (if available in your major) to establish closer relationships with faculty. Opt for essay exams or extra work whenever possible to draw attention to your writing, research and initiative. And, of course, maintain strong academic performance.
- **Office Hours** - Faculty keep regular office hours during which time they are available for casual student contact, questions and discussion. Office hours provide students the opportunity to pursue discussion on course topics, to ask for further background material related to course topics or to discuss the major in more detail with a professor. This is also a perfect time to convey to the professor interest in pursuing a graduate degree and to ask which graduate school programs are respected and recognized by others in the field.
- **Independent Studies** - Independent study is typically initiated by upper division students and is based on a topic of interest to both student and professor. A professor can require topical readings and a laboratory or written project so that the experience qualifies for departmental credit (199s). Such an experience will introduce students to research in their field of interest and provide the opportunity for substantial faculty contact. The Academic Enrichment Program (<http://aep.ucsd.edu>) offers students the opportunity to assist professors with their research through the Faculty Mentor Program.
- **Directed Group Studies** - Faculty contact will also result when students enroll in group studies courses (198s) in which several students are directed by a faculty member in a special project, usually of the professor's choosing, in laboratories, libraries or field sites.
- **Academic Internships/Volunteer Activities** - Students are responsible for finding internships or volunteer experiences related to their major or career goals. These experiences may or may not be well-supervised and guided by faculty. Try to choose those which include faculty participation so that you can maximize your chances for faculty contact and discussion. The **Academic Internship Program** located in the Literature Building offers faculty-sponsored internships for credit (AIP197).
- **Teaching and Research Assistantships** — Consider offering to become a teaching or research assistant for professors. Generally students have performed well in courses that they want to "TA." The possibility of becoming a research assistant normally depends upon faculty need for library or laboratory work by assistants, and/or upon available space in laboratories and adequate funding.

## ESTABLISHING CONTACT WITH PROFESSIONALS

Some professional school programs require or recommend letters of recommendation from professionals in that same field who can attest to the applicant's suitability, preparation and motivation for the profession, and can comment on qualities which relate to the applicant's potential to succeed in professional school. These include: master's programs in business, social work, counseling, public policy and administration, physical therapy, public health, and international affairs; doctoral programs in law, dentistry, pharmacy, optometry, osteopathic, podiatric and veterinary medicine; and teaching credential programs. UCSD offices which can assist students in developing contacts with various professionals include: (1) the **Career Services Center**, which lists paid jobs and internships both on and off campus on Port Triton and maintains an Internship Supersite on <http://career.ucsd.edu>; (2) the **Volunteer Connection**, located in the Price Center, offering unpaid experiences; (3) the

**Health and Medical Professions Preparation Program** (<http://aep.ucsd.edu/hpp.html>), part of the Academic Enrichment program which has a mentoring program; and (4) the **Academic Internship Program** (<http://aip.ucsd.edu>) can help you obtain internships to meet professionals in your chosen field(s).

## CONTENT OF GOOD LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

You want to be certain that your writers are aware of all of your accomplishments so they can discuss the work you did with them in the context of your whole record. Students can help in the construction of their letters by providing certain information to the people who will be writing the letters. Background information like **transcripts, autobiographies, resumes, personal statements** and **research papers** can help faculty members or professionals write thorough and substantive letters. Provide such documentation for your writers whenever possible.

If your letter-writers prefer, you can provide them with much of this information through an **Online Career Portfolio** – an online collection of your academic and extracurricular history – that you can set up through Career Services. If you have not yet done so, click on “Career Portfolio” on the left-hand side of your TritonLink page to start one today!

1. **Build:** Use the section entitled “Build” to enter your skills and experiences in a “skills matrix”, upload your resume, unofficial copies of your transcript and writing or project samples (websites, PowerPoint presentations, published works, etc.), and state your academic goals.
2. **Manage:** Once completed, you can select various portions of your Career Portfolio to make available to your letter-writer through the “Manage” function. Select the portions of the Portfolio you wish to share, enter the writer’s email address, and a link to the information you selected will be sent to the writer. The writer can then create their own password to access the Portfolio at a later date.

If you or your letter-writers are uncertain about the letters' content, request the handout titled **"Suggestions For Writing Letters of Recommendation"** available in the Professional and Graduate School Opportunities office.

## REQUESTING A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION (PROTOCOL)

1. Request letters of recommendation in person whenever possible. Allow enough time at that meeting to discuss your request, your background and any questions the letter-writer might have.
2. Be gracious in your request. Do not expect a letter as your right and also do not negate your right to ask.
3. Ask if the potential writer can write a substantive *positive* letter in support of your application. Never press a prospective referee to submit a letter when he or she appears hesitant to fulfill your request.
4. Allow at least two months between your request and the application deadline.
5. Always thank your recommender in writing. A handwritten note is always appreciated.