

Bucknell University Department of Geology

Letters of Recommendations Guidelines

Although grade point averages, coursework, and standardized test scores play a role in graduate school admissions and employment opportunities, decisions are rarely based on numeric scores alone. In fact, highly competitive programs often simply use these scores as a screening device to reduce the size of their applicant pool. Letters of recommendation can be extremely important.

1. Think carefully about potential letters writers. In general, the best letters of recommendation are from people who:

- Have worked with you closely (*e.g.*, a research supervisor)
- Have known you long enough to write with authority (*e.g.*, academic advisor)
- Have relevant expertise (*e.g.*, professors in the case of academic applications)
- Have a positive opinion of you and your abilities
- Have a supportive personal style

If you apply to graduate school in geology, it is typically useful to have letters from two or more geology faculty. However it is common for one letter writer to be a faculty member from a different discipline, often a supporting science, mathematics, or engineering. Also, it is common for geology majors applying to graduate school to have a letter from a mentor who supervised your summer internship, research experience, or field camp.

Because the choice of letter writers is important, you should begin cultivating personal relationships with potential letter writers early. If you're not certain whether prospective letter writers have enough experience with you or have a positive enough impression to write a strong letter, there is nothing wrong with asking them whether they would be able to write an enthusiastic letter. After all, you will be competing with people who have uniformly strong letters of recommendation. So a mildly positive letter from someone who doesn't really know you can actually do more harm than good.

- 2. Make an appointment to meet with your potential letter writers** and formally ask them if they would be willing and able to write a letter for you. During that appointment, it would be appropriate to share your motivation for applying for the position and ask if the letter writer has any questions and concerns at that point.
- 3. Give your letter writers plenty of time** so they have adequate time to develop a thoughtful, thorough letter before the deadline. A well written letter takes hours to write and revise. A minimum of three or four weeks is customary and respectful of the letter writer's time and effort.
- 4. Give your letter writers a well-organized packet of materials** with all the following elements clipped together or contained in a single large envelope.

- a. A **cover letter** briefly listing six items:
 - Your contact information
 - List of employers/schools and deadlines for all the letters that you need
 - Your career aspirations and the type of position you are seeking
 - Information you would like your letter writer to emphasize. Good letters of recommendation mention things that make you stand out.
 - Summary of work/projects/TA experience completed with your writer (if any)
 - If applying to graduate school, a draft of your essay, which should explain why you seek a graduate degree, what discipline you will study (e.g., paleontology, environmental law), and attributes that make the program you are applying to a good fit (faculty with similar interests, instrumentation, course work etc.). Seek input from your letter writer to improve the essay.
 - Any other information you deem relevant
- b. A current copy of your academic **transcript** showing the courses you've taken and the grades received. An official copy is not required; a photocopy is fine.
- c. A copy of your **resume**
- d. A pre-addressed **envelope** for each letter that will be mailed. If there are letters that should be returned to you in a sealed envelope, be sure to write your name and the school's name on the outside of each envelope. Many letters of recommendation for graduate school applications are submitted electronically. The applicant fills out an online application that lists the letter writers and their contact information. Be sure that you submit the correct email address of your letter writers. Check to see that the writer received notification or instructions for electronic submissions.
- e. Any **forms** that are supposed to be submitted with the letter. If there is a form that goes with the letter, *complete as much information as possible* (everything except ratings, evaluative statements, signature, and date). For example, type or neatly write the recommender's name, title (e.g., Associate Professor), and full contact information (e.g., telephone number, fax number, postal address, email address). This allows your letter writer to focus strictly on the recommendation itself.

Note: If you're asked to indicate whether or not you waive access to the letter of recommendation, be sure to answer affirmatively (that you waive this right). Answering otherwise gives the appearance of not trusting your letter writer, and it dilutes the effectiveness of the letter. In other words – if you follow the steps above, you should trust what your writer will be saying.

By adhering to these general guidelines, you will increase the chances of getting strong letters of recommendation by the deadline and ultimately securing the position you seek.

5. **Never assume!** Completing your application packet (including enough letters of recommendation) is ultimately your responsibility. That means you should take the steps necessary to make sure that all the letters are submitted. Normally it is possible to inquire that status of your application, either online or by calling the graduate school office. If learning that a letter has not been submitted, it is reasonable and appropriate to kindly inform your writer that their letter has not been received.