

# **SECURING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION FOR GRAD SCHOOL**

**WHO EVEN CARES WHAT OTHERS SAY ABOUT ME?**

**DR. SARAH A LACY  
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# WHEN DO I NEED A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION?

- Applying to:
  - Scholarships and fellowships, including programs like McNair and Sally Casanova
  - Some grants, especially for more junior scholars like undergraduates
  - Graduate school
  - Academic jobs
- Sometimes you need one as a letter of introduction to visit a particular research site, especially old school archives and museums abroad

# WHAT IS A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION?

- Letters of recommendation are not references
  - You are asking someone to draft a formal letter on official letterhead describing your strengths and why you would be a good candidate for whatever you are applying for
  - Each letter should be personalized to the place you are applying to
  - It is a lot of work for the letter writer—the assumption is that the writer would only put this much work in for a student they really believe in
  - The letter should reflect long standing and personalized knowledge of the candidate
- This is a reflection (unfortunately) of why so much of academia is who you know and who you are affiliated with

# POLICY FROM MY SYLLABI

- *Rules for getting a letter of recommendation:* I am happy to write letters on behalf of students to get them into graduate school or assist in employment opportunities; however, there are some unspoken rules that I will lay out for you explicitly. **I need to know who you are.** That means you've taken more than one class from me, and you were interactive, attentive, and demonstrated interest and comprehension. I don't like sending out generic form letters or damning you with faint praise. **I need to know your personality well enough to address questions about your fit for a program or your ability to handle failure and success.** You don't have to have an A+ in my classes, but you should not ask for recommendations from a professor who gave you a C. If you did not earn a high grade, do I know why (i.e., did you keep me in the loop about other circumstances affecting your performance)? Did you show improvement over the semester? I need to know you and your situation well enough to give concrete examples in a letter. I will actually give you a form when you ask for a letter where you indicate what you think your strengths are and why you asked me for this letter. This advice should also guide your selection of other letter writers as well as be considered before the semester begins if you think you will need a letter. Forming a relationship with faculty members should not be scary and can help your grade performance and your future success. And honestly, I am pretty nice.
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# WHO SHOULD WRITE YOUR LETTERS?

- Your letter writers need to know you
  - Your family doesn't count
- They also need to be familiar with your academic achievements
  - In some cases, a boss/employer can write you a letter, but they need to speak to aspects of your work that is relevant to what you are applying for (work ethic, responsibilities, creativity, etc)
- Senior professors with large social networks within their discipline carry weight
- Faculty members you did research with will be able to say the most about your ability to succeed in graduate school

# WHO SHOULD WRITE YOUR LETTERS?

## GOOD EXAMPLES

- Roberto asked:
  1. The PI of his research lab, Dr. Smith
  2. Dr. Wang, a professor he took 3 classes with and he got straight As in
  3. Mrs. Lightfoot, the director of the affinity center on campus where Roberto volunteered
- Mrinalina asked:
  1. Dr. Richmond, a professor she studied abroad with for a month in Italy
  2. Dr. Benga, a professor she took two graduate level lab courses with and she got B+s, (but as an undergrad in a grad class, this was impressive)
  3. Dr. Gomez, her major advisor who has followed mentored her for the last 3 years

# WHO SHOULD WRITE YOUR LETTERS?

## POOR EXAMPLES

- Samantha asked:
  1. Dr. Ho, a professor from the community college she took one class with 5 years ago
  2. Mr. Alvarado, her dad's friend who works at a bank
  3. Mrs. Pinho, the mother of a student she tutored after school
- Angel asked:
  1. Dr. Ahmed, a professor he took an intro class with where he got an A, but there was 150 students in the class
  2. Dr. Sorensen, a professor who seemed to like him in an upper division class, but Angel never turned in his final project
  3. Mr. Sokolich, his high school basketball coach

# WHAT IF I ONLY HAVE THOSE POOR OPTIONS?

- You won't because you planned ahead!
- A student who plans to go to graduate school hopefully knows to also be building meaningful relationships with faculty!
  - Don't feel bad—I didn't know I needed letters either when I was an undergrad, but I had luckily built these relationships already





# WHEN TO ASK AND HOW TO ASK FOR A LETTER

- Give your letter writers lots of warning!
  - Ask them early in the fall—they may have insight into the places you are applying or better yet, they have a friend there and can make connections for you
  - You don't even have to know all the schools you are applying to yet, just that you will need letters this semester
- Normally I would say do this in person, but times have changed
  - A formal email will suffice, but you can also schedule a zoom meeting to get their insights
- When you ask, tell them why you are going to grad school, what you intend to study, and why you think you will do well
  - They may choose to use your own words!
- Tell the letter writer why you chose them
  - Especially if you chose writers to speak to different aspects of your application (research, employment, scholastic achievement, etc.)
  - This helps them figure out what to write

# WHAT SHOULD YOU INCLUDE WITH YOUR REQUEST?

- Include your cover letter and CV once you have them to help them compose a relevant letter
- If there was an issue about your academic journey, be honest and transparent
  - If your GPA doesn't reflect your work ethic, tell the writer why with a short statement
    - They can discuss it in their letter in a confidential way with the application committee
- Yes, sometimes professors will ask you to write the letter yourself and they will edit and sign it
  - This is a huge red flag—this person either doesn't care enough to write a letter or doesn't know you well enough
  - Unless they are very old school and have lots of cache, you probably should ask someone else
    - Committees can recognize these letters from a mile away

# WHAT SHOULD YOU INCLUDE WITH YOUR REQUEST?

- Give the letter writer a list of all the schools/programs/scholarships/grants you are applying to in descending deadline order with the deadlines clearly written
  - If there is anything special about the program, e.g., you are mostly applying to PhDs, but this is a masters program, make it obvious
  - I recommend making a google sheet and sharing it with them
    - Include a column for deadlines, school names, programs you are applying to, and potential advisor in that program
    - You can assign the letter writer their own column to check off each letter they submit, so that you know that it is done
  - Also let them know if it is physical letter—most letters now are PDFs submitted through a portal emailed to the letter writer
    - If it is a physical letter, give them a stamped envelope with the address already filled in

# WHAT DOES A GOOD LETTER INCLUDE?

Explains the relationship between the applicant and writer

Lists multiple strengths of the applicant with concrete examples to back it up

Detail why this applicant makes sense for this program

Addresses any discrepancies, such as why the student took a year off from working in their lab, etc.

Don't leave the application committees guessing because they will probably assume it is something worse than it really was

# WHAT DOES A BAD LETTER INCLUDE?

Faint praise is bad—the committee assumes this is a diplomatic way of not saying good or bad things about the candidate

No concrete examples about the candidate

- Does the writer even know them?

Reference to lots of personal things about the candidate that legally the committee couldn't ask

- E.g., the applicant's sexual orientation, whether they have children, their parents' immigration status, etc.

This is why you want someone who knows you well AND knows how to write these letters

# IS IT OK TO REMIND MY RECOMMENDERS?

- YES! ABSOLUTELY!
- Professors have a lot on their plates—we appreciate a reminder a week or two before the deadline
- Some application portals will show you where your recommenders have uploaded their letters—some won't
  - If you can't see, send a reminder unless the professor told you explicitly that they already did it



# A WARNING ABOUT INTERCONTINENTAL LETTERS

- American letter writers are overly positive about candidates, and European readers find them too effusive and difficult to interpret
  - European letter writers try to include pros and cons of all candidates, even people they really like
  - This can be interpreted by American readers as a negative letter as Americans would never include a negative about a good candidate
    - This hurts European candidates to American programs
  - Be aware of this when choosing writers or applying outside the county
    - It is ok to remind your letter writers of this and they can state it explicitly in their letter

**QUESTIONS?**





# EXAMPLE

I am writing in support of ██████'s application to the graduate program at ██████ University. I had ██████ in Biological Anthropology (upper level seminar course) and Forensic Anthropology last school year and as an independent study student. I have also attended three conferences with ██████: The Southwest Association of Biological Anthropology meetings in ██████, the American Association of Biological Anthropology meetings in ██████, and the European Paleopathology Association meetings in ██████. Her dedication to the field of biological anthropology, our department, and her diverse academic achievements at CSUDH make her an excellent candidate for your program.

██████ is a mature, driven, and brilliant student who has excelled in her anthropological course work at CSUDH. This is not merely reflected in her high departmental GPA, but in her comprehension and application of anthropological concepts in her off-campus employment and community service. ██████ brings anthropology to her after-school children's care, summer camp teaching, and tutoring providing a cross cultural lens. Her employment is primarily in education, and I've been impressed by how she brings anthropology into it. She was awarded a competitive internship at the Smithsonian Museum, and even there, she was frequently tapped to do outreach. She will make an excellent educator.

██████ is a major fixture in our department. She attends colloquia, speaker series, and spends time in the departmental student lounge. This has given myself and the other faculty members many opportunities to get to know her outside of class time. Our department does not have a graduate program, so advanced undergraduate students like ██████ have filled that 'ecological niche'. She contributes to our departmental community with her engagement: e.g., staying after talks to speak with the visiting scholar, assisting other anthropology students with comprehending their reading. When I interviewed for this job in 2017, ██████ was the first student to ask me a question after my job talk! Considering our department's small size, she has been able to get a hands-on liberal arts school style education unique amongst large state schools in California. She came into the program planning to do research and has made it happen.

██████'s CSUDH grades qualify her for Lambda Alpha, the national anthropology honors society, of which I am also the faculty mentor. Her well-rounded academic and professional experiences while at CSUDH suggest to me and the other faculty in anthropology that she is ready to pursue future leadership opportunities in graduate school. She has already worked hard to get an internship at the Smithsonian and attend conferences to network with potential graduate advisors with my help. This is extremely impressive for an undergraduate and why I felt comfortable to bring her with me to a conference in Europe. She seems really excited about ██████ and the resources there to pursue genetic research on human health through an anthropological lens. Our department would be very pleased to see her benefit from the training and mentorship ██████ could provide her.

Anthropology training gives one a unique perspective in human experience; however, the diversity of experiences within the field is often lacking. I think ██████ will broaden her CSUDH anthropological experiences through ██████ as a move towards broadening the field. She is going to be extremely successful, and I am proud to have mentored her thus far. I am excited for her to move onto new conquests in her career trajectory within anthropology. Please feel free to contact me with any more questions about her qualifications.

Dr. Sarah Lacy