

Considerations for Students Requesting Letters of Reference

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I regularly receive requests from students for letters of reference to attend graduate studies. In some cases, I agree to write such letters. Where thorough vision, planning, and excellence are shown, and where a good and memorable rapport has been established, I am happy to serve as a referee. On the other hand, when a student does not reflect the standards that graduate studies require, or where our connection is not very strong, I will recognize that I can only write a weak reference at best. In such cases I often recommend that the student look at other options. The following questions may help orient students to the considerations involved.

Our Relationship

Reviewers prefer referees with whom you share a significant connection. If we don't know each other very well, I will decline. The fact that you enjoyed my course does not really make a difference. What does help: a pattern of active positive engagement over several courses and/or extra-curricular or research collaboration. Consider:

- Which of my courses have you taken? (names and dates)
- How long have we known each other?
- Did you attend my office hours regularly?
- Have we worked together outside of the classroom (e.g research/arts/community projects)
- Do we have a good working rapport?

Your Goals

Reviewers will not be impressed by applications that lack a clear focus. However, if your intentions, goals and vision are clear (and hopefully also interesting/compelling) I will be eager to support you.

- What is your overall goal? What are your specific goals?
- Why are you applying to graduate studies? What motivates you?
- Is your statement of intent strong and original?
- How well does your current CV support and contextualize your intentions?

Your Strengths

The academic aspects of graduate school are rigorous and demanding. If I am unconvinced by your performance, I will decline. If however, you possess and demonstrate relevant strengths that I can speak about, I will be happy to write a reference.

- Why do you think you are a good candidate for graduate studies?
- Which of your relevant strengths will I be able to speak about?
- Did you score B+ or higher in my courses?
- Can you provide a current transcript to support your case?
- Do you have a clean track record of academic integrity?

Schools and programs:

You may be weighing several options for graduate studies. You should map out your intentions and strategy for each application separately. Each school will may have unique requirements. A thorough understanding of all these variations will help tailor-make a reference. If anything is vague or generic, I will really hesitate to help you. For each school:

- Have you already applied, or are you only in the planning stages?
- Which specific programs are you applying to? Why?
- How are you positioning yourself as an ideal candidate?
- Do you meet the grade threshold to apply?
- What is the website address for the program? (URL)
- What is the program's application procedure for reference letters? (URL)

I hope this has been a helpful reference. I welcome your feedback and questions. If you'd like to discuss graduate studies, send me an email or book a drop in session. Journey well!