

Quick Tips: References

Transcript

Let's take a look at some quick tips on the topic of references for graduate and professional school applications. Be sure to read all of the information in the "What you need to know" and the appropriate "Program Information" section to get you started on planning for your further education and studies. For graduate studies, each program usually states who they want as referees. Many schools require that you submit 2 academic references (meaning professors—although exceptions can be made for those who have been out of school for some time), while some ask for one academic and one non-academic. Examples of non-academic references can be coaches, volunteer supervisors, or employers. If there are no guidelines on whom to ask for reference letters, academic reference letters are highly valued as your referee should speak to your ability to be successful in graduate school. Using professional references is much more common for course-based programs. Most research based programs will require 2-3 *academic* references.

It is recommended that the most ideal professor to use as a reference will have taught you in a senior-level course, and/or is doing research in the same area of interest you are applying to, and also supervises graduate students if you are applying to a graduate program.

Professional programs will be specific about who they prefer you use for a reference, for example medical schools in Ontario want references from a variety of areas of your life to show you are well rounded; Law schools in Ontario prefer academic references unless otherwise specified; and Rehab programs will look for a mix of professional and academic references, with some very specific guidelines. Make sure you always review the reference requirements well in advance of applying so that you have time to secure the best possible references for your application.

Evaluate who can best provide a non-academic reference for your application and don't be fooled by titles. For example, having a lawyer write you a reference for law school will not help you get in, unless they know you very well and can comment on your capabilities (with proof) and academic success. Sometimes professional programs are very specific about who can write a reference letter and may not for example accept a letter from a teaching assistant.

How do you know if someone will give you a good reference? **You have to ask them**—if they won't give you a good reference, find someone else; often if professors refuse, it is because they don't know you well enough to give you a good reference — so get to know them!!

Remember that writing reference letters is part of a professor's job —they WANT you to succeed, but they need to know enough about you to be able to provide a strong reference.

Get way out in front of this—don't ask a person to be your reference 2 days before the deadline; ask them a MINIMUM of 6 weeks before the deadline, and send them appropriate check-ins or reminders.

When you approach your referee in person, go prepared. Take a copy of your transcript (highlight the courses you took with that professor so they know how you did in their classes), your résumé, and any essays or projects that you completed in their class. Give them a general idea of why you want to attend the school, and what areas of the field interest you. Ask if they require more information to write your letter.

Even further out from actually asking people to be your reference, make sure you cultivate relationships with professors you respect. Show you are engaged and that you like to pay attention in their classes. Go to office hours, ask questions in class—get yourself noticed!

Many students worry about who they should ask to write a reference letter as they may not feel close enough to their professors, and they often think that their professors have no idea who they are. But, professors are much more approachable than you think. As mentioned, writing references is part of any professor's JOB! But it is YOUR job to make sure that they know who you are and can write you a GOOD letter

- So: pick a professor whom you have taken several classes with, or one that you did a particularly memorable essay or project for.
- Start establishing those connections today. It does not take much to visit a professor during their office hours, or to ask questions after class (seriously, professors are excited when people do this—they LOVE talking to engaged students!!).
- Show the professor that you are interested in the class content, and that you have a goal to attend graduate school or a professional program, and mention that in the future you hope that they might write a reference letter for you.
- Talk to them about your intentions to go to professional or grad school—ask them for advice about schools/programs/etc. (you don't have to follow it, but it is part of your research planning for your further studies!)

ALSO: Faculty members have colleagues at other institutions and attend conferences where they meet people in their field all the time. Volunteer in a lab to gain experience and show a professor your skills. If you are closer with a TA in your class – ask them for an introduction to the professor.

With all of this in mind, start thinking about who could write detailed information about your skills as soon as possible.