

Confessions of a Brandeis Professor: How to Get a Great Letter of Recommendation (Or Not)

For the Hiatt Career Center

Pretend, for a minute, that you're a college professor. Two students have come in to ask you for letters of recommendation. The first student got a solid A on your exam, attended class religiously and took copious notes, although you did not hear from him in class very much – in fact, hardly at all. He never asked you for anything and did not seek help outside of class. The second student got only an A- on the exam. She, too, attended every class and took notes diligently. She was also a very vocal participant in class, was prepared with questions that reflected her consideration of the material, and sought you out during office hours.

So. Who do you write the letter for?

If you're me, you write for the second student, even if she didn't receive the highest grade in the class. Surprised? You shouldn't be. There's a lot that goes into a professor's decision to write a letter of recommendation. And that might seem scary, because it's the one part of the interview process that's completely out of your control.

Or is it? In my many years of teaching, I have written dozens of letters, and I've discovered that students can take steps to ensure that you get that glowing recommendation that will seal the deal.

First Things First

The most important piece of advice I can give you is that which is most often overlooked by students. Let's use graduate school as one scenario. You should have some very concrete reasons for going to graduate school before asking for letters of recommendation. Take, for example, the student who is about to spend \$100,000 in a two-year master's program. If you were going to purchase anything for \$100,000, wouldn't you do a lot of research to confirm this is what you want? Surprisingly, many students don't do that and regret their decision later on. The lesson here is that choosing to attend graduate school is no small decision. The first question I ask students is "why do you want to go" and I am no longer surprised that many students can't articulate compelling reasons to go. Don't fall into that trap. The same logic applies if you are asking for a recommendation for a job too.

You have many resources at your disposal to help you determine whether graduate school is right for you at this *particular* time. Professors, family, friends, alumni in graduate school can all give you some insight and perspective that will help you but one of the most helpful resources is one that is often overlooked – the Hiatt Career Center.

The staff at Hiatt has the resources designed to challenge and support you in your decision-making process and to think through the tough decisions about deciding whether to attend graduate school; choosing programs (this is a conversation you should be having with faculty as well and Hiatt can help you set up those meetings); applying to graduate school and financing it.

More specifically, here are some key questions Hiatt staff and others can help you think through. If you don't have concrete answers to these questions, you may want to rethink your decision.

Key Questions

- What goal(s) will graduate school help you to accomplish?
- How will your educational and work experience allow you to choose an appropriate graduate program and to be successful in it?
- How will the type and duration of your educational and work experience allow you to get the most out of a graduate school program?

Set Yourself Up for Success

Congratulations. You have made it passed the first hurdle and have decided graduate school is right for you and want to approach me for a recommendation. The first step you need to take requires a little advance planning, well in advance of your approaching your professor with hat in hand: You need to be an active student in class. This is true whether you're in a small seminar or large lecture; your professor needs to know more than how you performed on an exam at the end of the semester. If I'm faced with two requests for letters, one from an engaged student who participates and one from a student who is present only physically, I'm going to write for the engaged student, every time. I need to know that the student for whom I'm writing is diligent and committed, that she has an inquisitive mind and is willing to learn more, that she has absorbed the material in a thoughtful way – to learn because she needs to know it, not because she needs to ace an exam.

Couldn't you just write for both students; you might sensibly ask? Well, no. Letters of recommendation are like paper money; the more that are printed, the less valuable they become. And letters of recommendation reflect my judgment and impact my credibility, so I'm going to be cautious in deciding which student deserves my praise.

Being an active participant in class has a more self-serving benefit, too: If the professor knows you well, she's more likely to agree to write the letter. And if the professor can write about you from a more personal standpoint, the stronger the letter will be. You want your professor to know you well enough to be able to say something unique and original about you, in addition to noting that you wrote a brilliant exam (n.b.: while I have written many strong letters for students who were not the best students in the class, they had to have at least done well. You always want the best letter you can get,

and you won't get it from a professor in whose class you did not perform well – it will be lukewarm at best. And a lukewarm letter is worse than no letter at all).

So be engaged. Be interested in the material and let your participation in class reflect that. Seek out your professor during office hours, and come equipped with questions or comments about what you're learning. You'll find, too, that if you do, you'll get a lot more out of class than if you just show up.

Hiatt staff concur that a faculty members' depth of knowledge about a student is critical to the writing of a strong letter of recommendation. They suggest that, if you were not as engaged as you might have been in a class, you should immediately begin to build your relationship with a faculty member by meeting with her. By seeking out graduate school or employment advice from a faculty member, and sharing your aspirations with her you may be able to move beyond "silent face in a class" status to the point where a faculty member would be comfortable writing you a strong letter.

Ask and You Shall Receive. Well, Almost.

Okay, so now that you've participated actively in class and you did well on the exam, you're all set, right? Sorry, not quite. Most professors, like me, want to write about their students in a broader, more holistic fashion; in addition to writing about the student's performance in class, I like to talk about what makes the student a unique candidate. I've noted in some of my letters that the student was the first in his family to go to college, or that she had worked through school to pay her way, or that she had started the first recycling program in her town's elementary schools.

I'm also going to want to know what I'm writing the letter for – is it for graduate school? Professional school? Post-graduation employment, and if so, public or private sector? Knowing why I'm writing the letter will affect how I present my opinion and will make my letter much more focused and effective.

Thus, when you approach your professor for a letter of recommendation, come prepared. Ask for a few minutes of your professor's time so that you can tell her what she needs to know to write a strong letter. Think about what might make you stand out, and don't be shy to talk about it (in a humble sort of way, of course). Bring a copy of your resume and a draft of your personal statement – bullet points at least – so I know why you are interested in this particular field. Let your professor know what you're going to use the letter for and be ready to discuss why you're pursuing that path.

I also appreciate students who realize that they're asking me for a favor, even if it is one that I'm happy to do. I'm particularly happy to write for students who thoughtfully give me pre-addressed, stamped envelopes, extra copies of documents or forms that I need to append, contact information if I need it.

That Final Touch

As difficult as it might seem to believe sometimes, professors are people too. So after you've asked, and the professor's agreed, send a thank you note. We professors really appreciate it.

You don't have to do any of these things. It's your choice – you could choose just to show up to class and do the minimum, you could choose just to ask your professor for a letter and limit her to what she knows about you from class alone, you could choose not to make your professor's life easier by providing her with everything she needs to write a strong letter. But you reap what you sow. If you show your professor that you're serious, that you care about what she's going to write about you, that you are grateful for her taking the time to do this service for you, her letter will reflect that. And that will make all the difference.