

This is an example of one professor's policy for writing recommendations for graduate school. Contact your own professors to ask them about their own approaches to writing recommendations.

Professor Karen Hossfeld's
Policy for Writing Graduate School Recommendations

So, you are considering graduate school: good for you! Part of your application process will probably include asking faculty members for letters of recommendation. This can be daunting, so I have written up my own set of policies and procedures in order to help explain the process. Note that other professors may do things differently.

My Criteria: Like most professors, I get many requests to write letters for students, but am not able to write them for all of you. If I don't think I am in a good position to write for you, I will tell you. But I will be glad to do so for you if I think I can give you my strong professional recommendation, based on my own direct experiences with you. Typically, this means that you have taken at least one small-sized class with me where I have been able to closely evaluate your academic abilities, ideally including your research and writing skills. It also means that I have gotten to know you, through our interactions in and/or outside of classes.

In addition, my general* criteria are as follows:

- You have at least the minimum recommended/expected GPA for the programs to which you are applying. If the programs don't specify this in their descriptions, contact them and ask. [In my experience, most graduate programs minimally expect above a 3.0 and often higher – but this can vary.]

- You earned the following grades in any classes you took with me: "A's" if you are applying to highly competitive Ph.D., Law, Medical School or similarly demanding programs; at least "B+'s" if you are applying to M.A. programs or less competitive Ph.D. and other programs.

(*I occasionally make exceptions in my grade and GPA criteria, if I have worked with you closely and think you have exceptional academic and professional potential.)

Procedure:

A. Contact me well in advance (at least 2 months, but even a semester beforehand) to ask if I am an appropriate person to write for you. Tell me what kind of program you are applying for and approximately when your applications are due. Remind me what classes you took with me and when, and what grades you earned with me. Also give me your GPA and when you graduated or will graduate.

B. If I agree to write for you provide me with all of the items listed further below, under "Provide me with the following," at least 4 weeks before your due date.

- C. E-mail me a week before the letters are due, to remind me.
- D. Be sure to let me know where you get in and where you decide to go!

Provide me with the following at least 4 weeks before your first due date:

1. A list of all programs you are applying to, their due dates, and how I should submit my recommendation. (Most schools ask us to submit online, but some ask us to mail in hard copies.)
2. Any needed forms (with your info. filled out) and any needed stamped, addressed envelopes, if I need to mail any hard copies, including one to you if you wish. If a school has no form, I will need some guidelines from them or you as to what my letter should include.
3. A copy of your letter/statement of purpose. (If I have worked with you closely, I may be able to offer to read and edit drafts of your statement.)
4. An outline from you laying out:
 - what courses you took with me, what semesters, your grades
 - your gpa
 - your goals in grad school and beyond
 - what you would like me to emphasize in your letter (not time for modesty!).*

*Note: Faculty are supposed to write about things we have direct experience with (such as your work in our classes, our opinion of your abilities), but you can also mention to me other things you think are relevant that I might not know about (internships, being a TA, volunteer work, jobs, etc.) Also let me know if there are important dynamics or forms of diversity that have shaped you in a way that would be interesting to graduate schools, if you would be okay with my mentioning them in my letter. Examples include: overcoming family poverty, supporting yourself and/or family during school, coming from an under-represented group, being active in your community, and bilingualism. In addition, let me know if there are particular attributes you have that the graduate programs are specifically looking for. And tell me of any potential "weaknesses" in your profile that we should address (for example: why low test scores are not a good indicator of your abilities).

If I agree to write, I will do my best for you!

Good luck with your applications!

- Professor Karen Hossfeld