

SECURING STRONG LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Candace Rypisi, Assistant Vice Provost; Director, Student-Faculty Programs
candacer@caltech.edu

FUTURE

 **GNITED**

Letters of Recommendation

HERMAN®

by Jim Unger



**“D’you have any other references apart
from this one from your mother?”**

Letters of Recommendation

What are they, why are they important, and when do you need them?

- *An independent assessment of one's preparation, abilities, and skills to be successful.*
- *They are important because they provide a reviewer information about you that they might not otherwise get*
- *You are often asked for letters of rec when applying for jobs, graduate school, research programs, scholarships or other awards and prizes*

Key Points:

- Letters of recommendation are a very important part of your graduate school application
- They are read and who they come from and what they say is important
- Letters should come from someone who knows you well and can evaluate your ability to be successful as a graduate student
- You need to work at developing and nurturing academic relationships, *in part* so you can get good rec letters
- CAVET: This presentation does NOT speak to nuances regarding medical and/or other professional programs

What makes a strong letter of recommendation?

Letter-writers should:

- State how they know you and in what capacity
- Provide an assessment of your
 - intellectual capability
 - experimental ability
 - fundamental training
 - creativity
 - and motivation to be successful as a grad student
- Compare you to previous students who they have known over the course of their career

Who should I ask?

The Holy Grail:

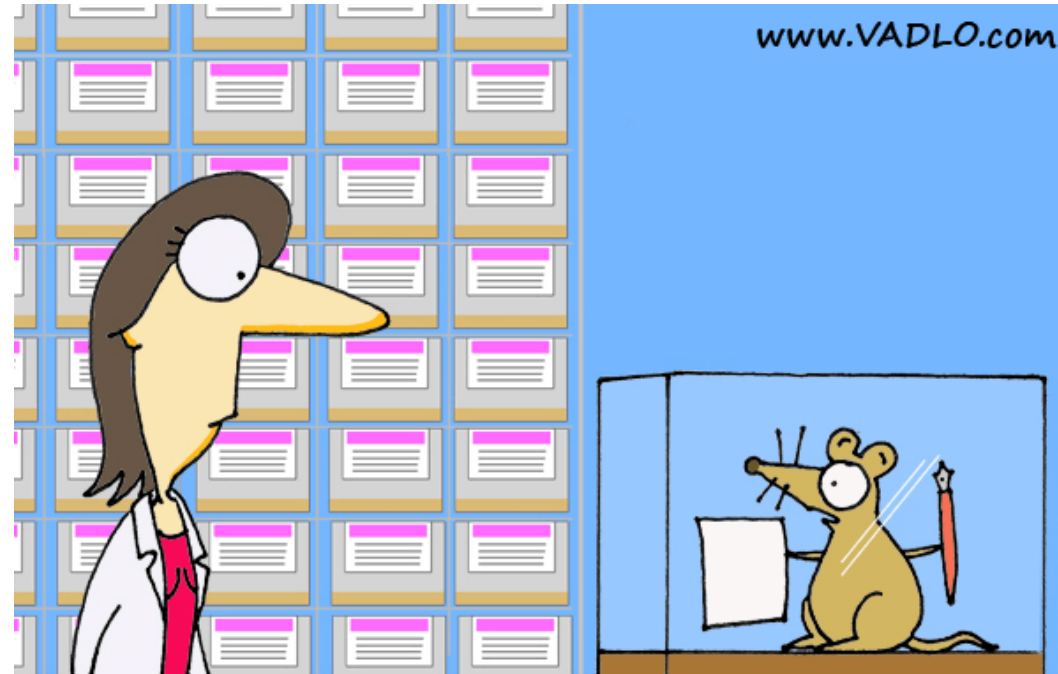
Letter One: Faculty

Letter Two: Faculty

Letter Three: Faculty

Examples:

- Professors
- Research mentor(s)
- Academic advisor
- Senior thesis advisor



"If your PI doesn't give you a reference letter,
I can write one for you!"

How many letters do I need?

- Generally 3

If I have more recommendations should I use them?

- Is there a compelling reason to include more?
- What do they add to your application package?

Quiz:

- Can you name three professors who you can, or might be able to (with the right nurturing), ask for a letter of recommendation?



Building Strong Academic Relationships with Faculty

How are you working to building strong relationships with faculty?

What have you seen others do?

Are you school, what are the opportunities to engage with faculty?

Building Strong Academic Relationships with Faculty

- Go to class...😊
- Participate in class/ask questions
- Attend office hours and have something to discuss
- Do research
- Write a senior thesis
- Meet regularly with your advisor
- Meet with faculty to discuss your academic and professional goals
- Be a TA
- Participate in campus academic organizations
- Attend campus seminars

The results

- Support and mentoring
- Engagement
- Increased learning
- Access

And, yes, strong letters of recommendation

Possible roadblocks

- Faculty are scary!
- Feeling like you are bothering them.
- Feeling like an imposter.
- Worried they might say no.
- Difficulty in advocating for yourself/singing your own praises.
- Having competing responsibilities that keep you from developing the needed relationships.

Other advice

- Follow-up on initial meetings and meet with faculty regularly
- Make yourself, your science, and your goals known
- If you are shy, nervous, or just plain scared, find someone who can help you plan and prepare for contact with faculty
- Connect with your career center or graduate dean's office for support
- Don't rely solely on email to build relationships

How do I approach a recommender?

- Don't wait until the last minute; ask at least a month before the letter is due
- Make every effort to ask in person
- Ask: Are you in the position to write me a strong letter of recommendation? Would you be willing to write me a supportive letter?
 - LISTEN CAREFULLY to the answer.
- DO NOT offer or agree to write the letter for them.

What information should I provide?

- Cover letter with your name, contact information and 2-3 bullet points of what they might emphasize in the letter or any gaps in your application that they can address
- A list of schools to which you are applying, and due dates
- A resume or CV
- An unofficial transcript
- A draft of your statement of purpose/essay
- Supporting documents (a final, a paper, etc.)

What do I do next?

- Gently nag
 - Make sure they got links to online letter submission sites
 - Remind the administrative assistant
 - Email, drop by, bring snacks!
- Say thank you
 - Send a hand-written thank you note
- Follow-up
 - Let your letter writers know the results of your applications
 - Discuss the process and your decisions with them

Staying in touch

- Email, call, or visit periodically
- Share interesting work
- Stay up-to-date with their research and successes
- Attend conferences and arrange to meet

Key Points Revisited

- Letters of recommendation are a very important part of your graduate school application
- They are read and who they come from and what they say is important
- Letters should come from someone who knows you well and can evaluate your ability to be successful as a graduate student

You need to work at developing and nurturing academic relationships

FUTURE



IGNITED