

*Child Development and Family Science
North Dakota State University
Information About Graduate School Applications*

Letters of Recommendation

Why Do I Need Them?

*Most programs require around three letters of recommendation. This allows the programs to get some insight into your academic abilities, reliability, work habits and motivation. Most programs have more applicants than slots in their program. The letters help them determine who will be the best fit for them.

Who Should I Ask?

*Ask someone who knows you well. Letters that show familiarity with you are seen as more credible and better sources of information.

*At least two of the people writing the letters should be people within your field or closely related to your field (e.g. if you are applying to Child Development programs, a letter from a professor in Mechanical Engineering might not be that helpful to selections committees).

*Letters from teachers and professors are generally preferable to letters from employers or volunteer agencies.

*It tends to be better to have letters from professors who teach upper-division courses—they will be able to speak to how you are as a learner *now* (rather than 2 years ago).

*Ideally, you will have at least one letter from a professor who knows you outside of the classroom—this could be someone you worked with on research, a professor you worked on your Field Experience with in some way, etc.

How Do I Ask?

*It is best to contact the potential letter writer to set up a meeting. Don't just ask for a letter by sending an email or calling on the phone.

*Explain to the potential letter writer that you are applying for graduate school, what area, and ask them if they would be willing to write you a positive letter of recommendation.

*If a potential letter writer does not feel he/she knows you well enough to write a letter, he/she will indicate this. That is why it is good to have several possibilities in mind.

What Should I Provide My Letter Writers?

*This varies across letter writers. However, the more information you give them, the more information they have to draw on for their letters. Many letter writers prefer the following types of information:

- **At NDSU, it is required that you sign a FERPA release, giving your letter writers permission to release information about you. This document is available on the web.**
- A resume or vita
- A copy of your transcript
- A sample of your written work
- A copy of your personal/goals statement or application essay or statement of purpose (whatever the school asks for)
- Other information about your or material that might be relevant to the program where you are applying
- A description of the program you are applying for
- The specific recommendation form or questionnaire if the school you are applying to has them
- If you are applying to more than one school, a chart that lists the schools, the deadlines the applications are due, and the instructions for letter writers.
- If the school wants letters sent individually, provide a stamped, addressed envelope to the letter writer. Some schools want all the materials for one applicant in the same big envelope. In this case, provide an envelope with your name and the name of the school on the outside and ask your letter writer to seal the letter inside and sign across the seal. If the school wants letters submitted via the internet, provide the instructions to do so.
- If you are applying to more than one school, it is also nice (and less prone to error) if you provide an electronic document with the names and addresses where the letters are to be sent. That

way the letter writer can copy and paste that information into their letters, saving them substantial time.

Other Things You Should Know

- To waive or not to waive the right to see the letter: Each school you are applying to may have a form that you have to sign indicating your choice on whether you waive the right to see the letters written for you. As noted above, you should probably not ask anyone who you are not confident can write you a good letter. While it is certainly well within your rights to NOT waive the rights to see the letter, there can be drawbacks to keeping that right. For one, some letter writers might not feel as comfortable writing you a glowing letter full of praise if they think you will see it. Second, selection committees might view confidential letters as more credible. Thus, consider all angles of this carefully.
- Make sure to give your letter writers ample time. At least 4 weeks before the first deadline is usually sufficient. However, if you know earlier exactly which schools you are applying for, it is better to give even more notice, and then drop a reminder note or email as the deadline approaches. ONE IMPORTANT NOTE: Make sure to account for holidays. Many application deadlines fall over the winter break or shortly after. If you do not ask your writers during the first semester, you may not be able to get into contact with them soon enough to get the letters in by the deadlines. Thus, it is very important to know well in advance when your applications are due.
- Send your letter writers a thank-you note soon after you know the letter has been sent out.
- Once you have heard from schools and made your plans about whether and where you will continue your education, it is nice if you let your letter writers know what those plans are.