

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION: THE BASICS

What are letters of recommendation used for?

- Letters of recommendation are used to demonstrate to an admissions committee that someone else, besides you, thinks you are a qualified candidate for law school. Because this is the purpose of the letters, it does not matter WHO writes them, but WHAT they write. Admissions committees frequently see letters from senators, congressmen, etc. and because they are generic and general, the letters do nothing to bolster an applicant's application. On the other hand, I once had a Dean of Admissions tell me that the best letter she has ever seen was one written by the supervisor of a janitorial staff who did not have the best language skills, but praised the candidate's work ethic and character in such a way that the committee could not refuse him acceptance into their law school.

How many letters do I need?

- It varies by school. In order to be prepared to apply for any school, we recommend that you get 3 letters—usually 2 academic letters (at least one should be from a professor in your major) and 1 non-academic letter (this can be from anyone so long as they are not related to you).
 - To see a list of what each law school accepts and requires, visit www.lsac.org, click on LSDAS, click on Letters or Recommendation, then find the “click here to see a list of law schools and their requirements.”
- If you have been out of school for several years and are no longer in contact with any of your professors, you can send letters from work supervisors or colleagues instead.

Where do I have the writers send the letters?

- You can do one of two things:
 - (1) You can address and stamp envelopes for each individual school and have the writer send one copy to each school.
 - (2) Because you signed up for the LSDAS grade service, LSDAS will take up to 4 letters of recommendation for you and add them to your LSDAS file. What this means is that instead of sending multiple copies to multiple schools, you can print out a short form online at LSAC, give it to your letter writer, and the writer can simply send ONE copy to LSDAS. The letter will then become a part of your file. Then, when law schools go to download your file with your transcript, they will also receive your letters of recommendation.
 - Note: LSDAS will take up to 4 general letters and send them to law schools in the order received unless you specify otherwise. As of fall 2004 LSDAS added an additional service that allows you to send not only general letters but also targeted letters to specific schools. If you are interested in doing this (e.g. one of your letter writers is an alum at a school you are applying to) go to the following website to watch a full tutorial: <http://www.lsac.org/LSAC.asp?url=/lsac/demos.htm>.

What should I give my writers in order to write the letters?

- You want to make this process as easy for them as possible. In order to facilitate the process for them, do the following:
 - Include a one-page sheet of instructions with a list of the schools you are applying to and a deadline for the letter to be sent by.
 - Include the “Letter to LOR Writers” drafted by Prelaw Advisor Catherine Bramble. Come to our office or email us for this letter.
 - Include any specific letter of recommendation forms the law schools you are applying to require your writers to fill out. Fill these forms out as much as possible for the writer.
 - Include a copy of your resume, transcript, and the best paper you have written in college or your personal statement.
 - Pre-address and stamp envelopes.
 - Put everything in one large envelope, hand-deliver the envelope if possible, and follow-up immediately to make sure they received it.

How far in advance should I ask my writers to write the letters?

- You should give each writer two weeks to one month to draft the letter.
- Because we tell all our students to aim for early November as their application deadline, this would mean you want to give all the materials to your writers by October 1st at the latest.

What should I tell my writers to write?

- Usually academic letter writers will have written hundreds of letters of recommendation and will not need advice on what to write. However, many times non-academic letter writers do not know what to write about. In either case, we have prepared a letter that you can give to your letter writers that will explain what letters are used for and what discussions are helpful. Please pick a copy of this letter up at our office or email us.

Do I need to follow-up with my writers?

- Absolutely. People get busy and, unfortunately, writing letters of recommendation is usually not at the top of the priority list. A few days before the deadline you gave your writers, contact them and make sure they either have already sent the letter or will be sending it by the deadline. Do not allow your application to remain incomplete for weeks or even months because an absent-minded professor forgot to send in your letter and you never took the time to follow-up.

SPECIFIC SCHOOL FORMS

- Some schools not only want your letter writers to write a general letter, but also to fill out a specific form (for example, rate John on a scale of 1-10 for the following 25 qualities).
- If the schools you are applying to have these forms, they must be sent directly to the school, NOT to LSDAS. You can still send the general letters through LSDAS, you simply need to make sure the specific forms get sent in a separate envelope to the school.