Letters of Recommendation Tips

Ask the right people
The most important aspect of any recommendation is whom you ask to write it, says Appleby. "The question is not, 'Can you write me a letter of recommendation?' but 'Can you write me a strong letter of recommendation?"" he says.

Most professors will answer the "strong letter" question honestly. This can save you from situations where a professor simply says you took a class with her and earned an A. Letters like that can actually hurt an application, particularly for internship recommendation letters, says Steve McCutcheon, PhD, who chairs the Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers Board of Directors. He says most students have already shown they are capable of earning good grades if they've made it to grad school. So seek recommendations that highlight such qualities as your character, dedication and drive.

Also, stick to people who have worked with you professionally — that excludes your therapist or your parents, he notes. "Even if your mother is a clinical psychologist," Appleby says, "nobody will believe that she can write an objective letter about her child."

For academic jobs, stick to letters from university faculty members and place extra emphasis on your research achievements and independence of thought.

Make the process easy
Busy professors spend hours writing recommendations. That's certainly the case for Appleby, who recently wrote 17 different letters to 17 different programs for just one student. Do everything you can to make the process easy, and your professors will appreciate it, he says.

For starters, let your letter-writers know how to send in their recommendations, since some schools require electronic submissions while others want hard copies. Give your writers a list of requirements and due dates for each program to help them stay organized.

Also, give them a summary of your achievements, research and other accomplishments. Even your closest advisers won't remember everything you've done and how you did it, says Deborah Boehm-Davis, PhD, psychology department chair at George Mason University.

Be specific about the program or position you are applying for so the letter can be tailored to your abilities and potential fit.
"Anything a student can do to make it easier for faculty members, they should do," says McCutcheon. "This is good common courtesy and good professional behavior."

Contact your letter-writers to ensure your letters are sent by the deadlines, says Appleby. He recommends students follow up within a week of the due date. Also, contact your grad programs and potential employers to confirm your dossier's status. Just use some restraint when checking on your progress. "You don't want to bug them all the time," says Appleby, "but a simple call or e-mail is in your best interest."

**Say Thanks**
E-mail's easy, but a hand-written note is usually the best way to thank letter-writers, says Appleby. A thoughtful thank you may also increase the chances for future recommendations or even mentoring down the road.

Anyone who writes you a recommendation letter cares about your future in the field and wants to see you succeed. So consider keeping your letter-writers updated on your progress—perhaps sending a quick e-mail about whether you got into a particular program, internship, postdoc or job, says Appleby

**Common misconceptions**
Finally, don't fall into some common traps of seeking recommendation letters. Many students, for example, may believe that having a "big name" on a letter of recommendation will increase their chances of acceptance. Yes, a letter from APA President James H. Bray, PhD, is impressive, but only if he's intimately aware of your achievements, character and future goals, McCutcheon says. If not, find a faculty member who can argue convincingly on your behalf based on what he or she knows from working closely with you.

Be sure your letter-writers can be specific. "Letters that are brief and general are the worst because they indicate that the letter writer is not familiar with the student," McCutcheon adds.

Also, don't ask to see a recommendation letter after it is written because recipients of the letter may be concerned that this will make letter-writers less candid. If you select the right faculty, "you should feel confident that the person will support your case," says Boehm-Davis.