

How to Orchestrate Letters of Recommendation for Graduate School

1. **Get to know your professors.** You can't know in advance which faculty you will need to ask for a letter of recommendation. Just assume every faculty member could write the key letter for your graduate school application. Of course, in large lecture settings, you only have limited opportunities for interaction, but you can still make an impression. Attend office hours, ask questions, and attend the faculty member's discussion sections. Do whatever you can to make it clear that you are thinking hard about the course material.
2. **Do well in the course.** In general, try to ask faculty for letters only after you have scored in the top 25% of the class (A, A-, or high B) Faculty like to write strong letters for their top students. Great performance in the classroom makes the letters easy to write.
3. **Get involved at UCI.** Participation in the intellectual life of the university provides multiple benefits for your future career. Such activities can greatly strengthen the crucial part of the letter describing your talent and future in glowing terms. Go well beyond average to stand out. For example, a long list of labs you have worked in is much less impressive than dedicated pursuit of a single research goal obtained after a year of hard work.
4. **Get ample clinical experience.** If you are planning on going to medical school, dental school, optometry school, or pharmacy school, gain clinical experience to demonstrate that you are aware of the realities of your chosen profession, and that you are passionate about pursuing your goal.
5. **Politely approach faculty 6-8 weeks before you need the letter.** Faculty workloads are enormous. When you approach a faculty member to request a letter, you are asking the person to set aside 1-2 hours as a favor to you. Timing is key here. Don't approach a faculty member during midterms or finals or the week after finals when grades are being processed. The week before the quarter starts, and the week between winter and spring quarters is also extremely busy. Christmas break and Thanksgiving breaks are also not good times to contact the faculty member. I write my June med school, dental school and pharmacy school letters at the end of June as soon as grades are finished, and then I take the month of July off and then I teach Second Summer Session which is a double courseload. I have very limited time during summer to write letters of recommendation. Email is not the best way to contact a professor for this type of request because professors who large lecture classes get an enormous number of emails and very often your email can get lost in the sea of emails for the professor's current classes. I much prefer you to come to my office hour (you can always find this information by looking at the website of the current class that I am teaching) and bring ALL of your paperwork (*see below.*)
6. **Get all of your paperwork ready in advance.** When you meet, provide the letter writer with a folder containing all of your official transcripts from all colleges you have attended, your resume, your personal statement, signed waivers, stamped envelopes, a photo, and for me, a copy of the filled-in extra questions sheet that you will find on any of my current websites, a list of classes that you had with me, and the deadline for sending in your letter. Your resume should include all honors, awards, outside activities, interests, publications, etc.

The health science advisors in biology can help you establish a letter file and provide a standard waiver. Waiving access to the letter provides a much stronger statement of confidence to admissions committees. *Letters without signed waivers are usually disregarded by admissions committees.* If the letter is being delivered on campus or online, no stamp is required. All off-campus letters require stamped envelopes. Fill out the envelope, waiver forms, etc. in advance, with address and return address information neatly printed or typed. Work through established letter mailing systems (Health Science Advisors, PharmCAS, AMCAS, etc.) in requesting letters. Once you bring all of your paperwork in a folder to my office, I will look over your materials and get back to you within a week or two to let you know if I can write you a strong letter of recommendation.

7. **Follow up with the writer to ensure your letter is sent.** Send a gentle reminder a week or two before the deadline.
8. **Write a thank you note to each letter writer.** Do not use email for this. The letter writer has taken a chance by endorsing you and appreciates being reassured that you are indeed the best candidate.
9. **Keep the letter writer informed.** You may need another letter from the same person someday. Send them an email a few months later to let them know how the application process turned out. Watching students attain their dreams is one of the most rewarding aspects of being a faculty member. Faculty want to help you succeed, and enjoy watching your success.