

Getting effective letters of recommendation for Graduate School Application

Students who are planning to apply to graduate school or pursue other careers after graduation, should be considering how they will build their applications. In particular, letters of recommendation from professors that know the student well will be required as part of the application package. These letters are written in November of the year before the start of graduate school, so students should start getting to know faculty at least one year in advance. With so many UW physics graduates, most faculty will be writing letters for multiple students; there may be 10 or more UW students applying to the same graduate program. Letters of recommendation play a large role in distinguishing among students with similar academic records.

Suggestions:

- Request letters of recommendation from professors that know you well, either through research, small classes, or frequent attendance at office hours. Letters need to add something to the application that is not clear from the transcript.
- Make a point of actively participating in lectures and office hours. Engage in conversations during office hours that show thinking beyond the required material and what its broader implications are. It is perhaps best to do this in office hours or post-class conversations, not during class, to avoid taking lecture time away from core material.
- Contact the professor early in the quarter and let them know of your expectation to apply to graduate school. Be sure to engage with the professor. Make sure to put significant effort into the class. Keep in touch after the quarter is over. There is a natural tendency to wait until grades are reported in a class before approaching the professor or requesting a letter. This often does not work well, particularly if the class was a big class.
- Ask for letters from people with a PhD, preferably in physics, when applying to a physics Ph.D. school. It is OK to have one letter from someone with a PhD in a cognate field. Teaching assistants or the graduate students that the applicant is working with on research can give input to the professor writing a letter, but it is the professor who must sign and send the letter. Post-docs should only be asked to write a letter if the professor is completely unavailable.
- Get at least one letter (preferably more) from a research advisor. This is expected of someone applying from UW: there is so much research going on here. Avoid moving between research groups just to get additional letters. It is better to have one excellent letter than three mediocre ones.
- Talk with the research advisor about long-term goals and define specific goals for any research experience. Keep the advisor up to date on progress.
- Share your CV with the professor when you request a letter so that the professor has a bit more context for your work.

Recommenders are asked to assess you relative to your peers on a scale of Top 1-2% (Exceptional), Top 5% (Outstanding), Top 10% (Excellent), Top 20-25% (Very Good), Above Average, Below Average. The areas in which they request assessment typically include some subset of:

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| • Intellectual ability | • Maturity |
| • Knowledge of the field | • Potential as a teaching assistant |
| • Ability to work independently / on a team | |
| • Originality / Creativity | |
| • Resilience / Perseverance | |
| • Oral / Written Expression | |
| • Planning / Organizational Skills | |
| • Laboratory Skills | |
| • Motivation for graduate study | |