

Getting a Letter of Recommendation
(from the Poli Sci Faculty at BYU)

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Every professor has a slightly different set of expectations when writing letters. Some want a really close relationship. Others don't care about that. Some professors need a lot of notice, others can get by with a couple of weeks. What this means is that to secure a letter from a *specific* professor you **must** *speak with that professor and learn what he or she needs*. That said, there are a few rules of thumb that may help students get started, and this document—based on a survey of the BYU Political Science faculty in the spring of 2011—should help students know where to begin.

Professor Priorities

What do professors care about? The single most important factor is classes. As one professor put it, “do good academic work; participate intelligently in class. The rest is gravy.”

This is true regardless of whether you are applying for an internship, a professional program (i.e., law or business), or a graduate program in political science or a related field. On a scale of 1 - 100 the average professor who took the survey put taking a class at 86 or higher. For comparison purposes, being an RA or a TA for a professor only rated around a 52 or a 55 for internship or professional school letters. Table 1 gives the average professor expectations by type of letter (internships, professional school or graduate school). The numbers reflect (on a zero to 100 scale) the importance of the factor for getting a letter).

Graduate school (in political science or a related field) is a bit different. Classes still matter the most (along with grades) but working as an RA is particularly helpful in securing one of these letters.

Note that these scores should be interpreted as *averages*. Some professors have different standards. One wrote, “students need to have one of the following three to get a letter from me: (1) good work as a student in my class, (2) good work as a TA for me, (3) good work as an RA for me. So, for example, if a student performed well in my

	Worked as RA	Worked as TA	Took a Class	Took Multiple Classes	Received High Grade	Interacted Out of Class
Internship	51.5	46.9	86.0	58.8	78.4	62.2
Professional School	54.8	49.9	87.9	60.3	78.0	68.1
Graduate School	70.0	53.7	90.4	68.3	90.9	76.8

Table 1: Cell entries indicate the relative importance for the responding professors for each type of letter. The most important characteristic in each category of letter has been bolded. The clear pattern is that for all types of letters classwork is the most important variable on average. Note: “took a class” and “took multiple classes” refer to classes taken from a specific professor.

class, than he/she doesn't need to be an RA or a TA for me (so those would be relatively unimportant). More than one of three allows me to write a stronger letter. Better than good work (i.e. great work) allows me to write a stronger letter. There is no difference for me in what students want the letter for (grad school, internship, etc.)."

Another professor wrote that "The real issue is usually not whether or not to write a letter; it is what kind of letter to write. So if I have a student who got a B in my ... class and never talked to me but still wants a recommendation, I usually tell them I will write a letter but it will necessarily be weak and perhaps not very helpful ... [T]hings like being a TA or RA or getting to know a student outside class dont have much influence on my willingness to write a letter but do have great influence on the quality of the letter I can write."

The Process

Professors want help with the letters. They write a lot (some professors write more than ten to fifteen such letters in a fall semester), so a bit of help will go a long way. Here were some specific comments from professors about this point.

- "They should give me a short bullet list of things they hope I will play up in the letter. This is a middle ground between having them write the letter themselves and, on the other hand, having me sit around for a long time trying to think of how this student stands out. I almost always base my letter heavily on this list of points, although I won't use any items that I don't agree with 100%. It saves me loads of time and it makes the letter better."
- "This is what I tell them ... I need ... : your resume, list of courses you took from me and grades you received, your statement of intent, titles of papers you wrote for me on which you received good grades, if paper form, form with waiver signed;

addressed and stamped envelope.”

- “Help me write a specific letter by providing ample details of your work in my classes or under my supervision. Try to minimize how much I have to look up in terms of performance indicators. Provide titles of major papers plus a description of the major arguments of the paper.”

One other point students need to remember is that professors want advance notice. Fifty-nine percent of the professors in the survey wanted at least two weeks notice for a letter. The balance wanted at least a month. **So plan ahead.**

Finally, professors want students to be thoughtful about asking. One wrote, “if I were asking for a letter of recommendation, I would ask the following question: ‘Can you write the kind of letter for me that you would want someone to write for you?’ If the answer is yes, then proceed. If the answer is no, then you may want to consider other options.” Another professor noted that “the question is not whether a student will get a letter from me but how strong, beyond the baseline of positive, the letter will be. I write stronger letters for students who have worked for me as an RA or TA. And I write more detailed letters for students who have taken multiple classes from me. Of course, excellent performance in work, in class, or—preferably—both definitely makes the letter that much stronger.”

Don’t Be Afraid to Ask!

The good news is that professors report writing letters for over eighty-five percent of the students who ask them. To the degree students get turned down it is because they haven’t taken a course from a professor or performed too poorly in the class. One professor commented, “the only student I ever turned down got a D- in the course. I think I was doing him a favor, though he did not see it that way.” So do your best in

class. Get as good a grade as you can (not necessarily the top of the class) and then don't be afraid to ask.