

HOW TO ASK FOR GRAD SCHOOL REFERENCES

Are you getting ready to apply for grad school? Is it time to get references? Here are some tips!

TYPES OF REFERENCES

Academic References

- Most common type
- Includes professors who have taught and assessed you
- Usually need two or three of this type of reference
- Does not include TAs

Professional References

- Often required for professional grad programs (MBA, MSW, etc.)
- Professionals who have managed your work and can attest to your suitability to career

Clinical References

- Only required for select health programs
- A health professional, ideally someone who you have worked alongside with clients

HELPFUL TIPS

- Make your request early, but not too early! Aim to ask for a reference one or two months before the deadline.
- Be prepared to provide your reference with the following information: details about the program(s), application deadlines and instructions.
- Timing is important. Some programs require you to complete your whole application before they will send your reference the form, so start your application early.
- Remember to let them know your aspirations and why you are applying. They may ask you for a draft of your statement of intent or a resume to help them with personalizing their letter.
- Be detail oriented, and follow the instructions accurately.

WHO TO ASK?

- Good reference letters will strengthen your application. Ask individuals who know you well and will endorse your abilities. Ask if they can support your application with a “strong” reference letter.
- Choose a professor you have achieved a good grade from. A “good grade” would be regarded as the grade the university requires for admission within the program. If a program requires a B+, try to ask a professor from a class you have achieved at least that grade in.
- Feeling nervous? Don’t worry. Remember, professors want to support their students with their academic goals.

BEFORE APPROACHING YOUR REFERENCES

- Every program has different methods of requesting a letter. Know if it will be an electronic reference (most common) or hard-copy letter, when the person will receive it and the deadline.
- Use a two-staged approach: email the individual to make the request for a reference, and then arrange a meeting. You could visit an instructor’s office hours or ask for a meeting to discuss grad school applications.
- Make sure you understand the qualifications/qualities needed in the program, and share these details with your reference to comment on those qualities in the letter.



FURTHER EDUCATION FAIR

- Occurs every year during mid-October — more details can be found on our [Careers Events page](#).
- Great opportunity to chat with admission reps about the application process.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How can I get recognized within a classroom?

- Start early! Get to know your professors before it is time to get a reference — the earlier, the better!
- Attend classes regularly, and sit in the front! Ask and answer questions in class. The discussion board on Avenue to Learn is also a great way to engage in classroom discussions.
- Going to office hours prepared with thoughtful questions is a good way to show that you understand the class material.

What is the best way to get to know my professors?

- Don't be afraid to talk to your professor about topics not related to classroom material. This could even involve talking to your professor about possible career opportunities within your field of study.
- Ask about their research. Professors love to talk about their research, especially if you have read any of it and have questions on it. This is a great way to set yourself apart and get noticed!
- Consider trying to get volunteer or summer research positions. Or search for teaching assistant roles — something about building relationships with professors outside of the classroom.
- Get involved with student-led faculty societies that might have close connections with faculty members.

Does my academic reference need to be from a subject area that aligns with my grad application?

- The best references are usually from the people who know you the best. If that happens to be someone who is relevant to the program you are applying to, even better.

How do I decide who to ask for a reference?

- Consider the most relevant and the most recent options, but prioritize individuals who can comment on your academic or professional abilities for the program.

What if I don't have any academic references?

- If you have been out of school for more than five years, contact the program and inquire if there are alternative references that they would accept.
- If you graduated less than five years ago, start reconnecting with professors. Help them remember you by sending samples of your work and your LinkedIn URL so they can view your picture.
- If that is not possible, take a university class (level 3 or 4) and build a relationship with the professor. Let them know your interest in grad school. Allow them time to familiarize themselves with your academic abilities.

What if my reference says no?

- This may be disappointing, but there could be many reasons for this: a lack of time, commitment to writing other reference letters and insufficient knowledge of you and your abilities.
- Gracefully ask for feedback or move on to another professor. This may be a blessing in disguise because you only want strong letters of support.



Should I let my references know if I got into the program or not?

- Yes! Update your references to let them know the result, either way. If you didn't get admitted, thank them for their support. If appropriate, let them know your plans for what's next and stay in contact.

SAMPLE EMAIL

Dear Professor _____,

I greatly enjoyed and benefited from the classes (be specific and name the classes/year/grade you received) that I took with you during my degree at McMaster. I am very interested and motivated to further my education in the field by pursuing a (be specific — name the program(s) your are applying to and the institution[s]). I would like to research (specify your research interest) further as I prepare for a career in (specify your career interest).

I was hoping that you would be willing to support my application by writing a strong recommendation letter to support my candidacy. To assist you with your decision, I have included a summary sheet that lists my key papers, including my senior thesis. I have also attached my resume, which will bring you up to date about some of my accomplishments outside the classroom.

Please let me know if you are willing to support my application to grad school. I would be happy to answer any questions and provide further information which will help you to write your recommendation. I would welcome meeting during your office hours to discuss this further.

Thanks so much for all you have done for me and for taking the time to review this request.

Sincerely,

Firstname Lastname

Your phone number

Your email

LinkedIn URL

Note: This sample is meant as a guide only. Customize the content to suit your personal situation.

