

Subject: Academic letter of recommendation for graduate school information

Dear Recommender:

The USC Dornsife Career Pathways Pre-law and Graduate School Advising team would like to thank you in advance for supporting our students. A strong letter of recommendation can be the deciding factor in a candidate's graduate school admission journey.

Most graduate schools prefer that candidates use the school's online portal to collect and disperse letters of recommendation. A handful of schools still prefer that the letters of recommendation come to the school directly from the recommenders. That is increasingly rare, and it is the candidate's responsibility to tell the recommender exactly where the letters should go and to provide proper envelopes and postage.

Each graduate school will have its own unique deadline. We generally encourage candidates to apply as early as possible in the process.

Please be frank with candidates about your timeline for writing and submitting your letter of recommendation so they know what to expect and how to follow up if needed. If a candidate applies to graduate schools early, but a recommender sends the requested recommendation later in the admissions cycle there are two possible scenarios. In one scenario, the candidate's file remains stagnant until the recommendation letter is received, costing the candidate any benefit they may have received from an early application. In the other scenario, the candidate's application is reviewed and a decision is made without benefit of the recommendation. Please help the candidate develop realistic expectations by sharing the time you feel you need to produce and submit the letter.

If you do not feel able to provide a strong recommendation, please let the candidate know to help give them enough time to request a letter of recommendation elsewhere.

We greatly appreciate you taking the time and energy to reflect on this candidate's qualifications for graduate school and write a letter of recommendation. If needed, the next page shares a few insights related to writing recommendation letters. If there is anything we can do to make the recommendation letter writing process easier or more efficient, please let us know.

Best regards,

Pre-Law and Graduate School Advising Team
Dornsife Career Pathways



GUIDELINES REGARDING WRITING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

- If the candidate has not already provided you with their resume, unofficial transcript, and a reasonably developed draft of their personal statement/statement of purpose, feel free to ask for them if useful to you in the writing process.
- Highlight skills graduate schools are particularly interested in, including:
 - Communication (verbal, written, interpersonal)
 - Research
 - Critical thinking
 - Logical analysis
 - Ability to read critically and make insightful inferences regarding large quantities of complex written information
- Provide concrete examples to illustrate how the candidate exhibited those skills in your class.
- Explain the content of the course(s) and its value, and explain the candidate's firm grasp of that content.
- Mention in detail any significant work the candidate did in your class. For example, "Mary wrote a 25-page term paper exploring the relevance of Sun Tzu's book The Art of War to the 21st century."
- If you can, compare the candidate favorably to their peers. For example, "Ms. Jones' work stood out in her class of forty honor students and I consider her to be among the top 5% of all students I've encountered in my 13 years of teaching."
- If the course is part of an honors program, mention that and discuss the criteria for participation.
- If the candidate's major only accepts a small number of applicants, or if the major (or course) has a low grading curve which makes the grades appear artificially low, explain those circumstances in some detail to give the admissions committee context.
- If you know that the candidate has a particularly strong knowledge base in some of the content areas applicable to their proposed area of graduate study, please mention that.
- Do not hesitate to share details which might help the graduate school admissions committee gain quality insights into the candidate's character, aptitude, and potential success in graduate school and their career.