

How to Ask for Grad School References

Getting ready to apply for grad school and have to get references? Here are some tips!

Types of References

Academic	Professional	Clinical
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most common type• Includes professors who have taught and assessed you• Usually need 2-3• Does not include TA's	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Often required for professional grad programs (MBA, MSW, etc.)• Professionals who have managed your work and can attest to your suitability to career	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only required for select health programs• A health professional, ideally someone who you have worked alongside with clients

Helpful Tips

- Make your request early to give your reference adequate time. Aim to ask for a reference at least 1-2 months before deadline. You can confirm their willingness and availability to be your reference earlier, especially, if you know that person to be highly sought after as a reference.
- 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?

- Letters that are excellent will strengthen your application. Ask individuals who know you well and will speak highly of your abilities. Ask specifically if they can support your application with a “strong” reference letter.



- Choose a professor with whom you have achieved a good grade. 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 in which you have achieved at least that grade.
- Nervous? 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 they will receive it and the deadline.
- Use a 2-staged approach – email to introduce a request for a reference and then arrange a meeting. You could visit 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 that with your reference so they can speak to those qualities.

Graduate and Professional School Fair

- Occurs every year in the Fall term- more details can be found on the events page on OSCARplus.
- Great opportunity chat with admission reps about 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 is also a great way to engage in classroom discussions.
- Go to office hours prepared with thoughtful questions is a good way to show that you understand 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 stand out and get noticed!



- Consider trying to get volunteer or summer research positions or look for teaching assistant roles – something about how to build relationships with professors outside of the classroom.
- Get involved with student run 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 reference is usually from the person who know you best. If that happens to be someone who is relevant to the program you are applying to, even better.

How do I make the decision about who to ask for a reference?

- Consider the most relevant and the most recent options, but prioritize those who well aware of your academic or professional abilities for the program.

What if I don't have any academic references?

- If you have been graduated for more than 5 years, contact the program and inquire if there are alternative references that would be accepted.
- If you graduated less than 5 years ago, start contacting and reconnecting with professors. Help them remember you by sending samples 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 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”?

- Though disappointing, there could be many reasons for this, e.g. lack of time, already writing many reference letters, 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 them 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 next steps and stay in touch.



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) to which you are applying 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

* Meant as a guide only. Customize the content to suit your personal situation.

