

Graduate School

Winning Strategies for Getting In
With or Without Excellent Grades

Chapter 7 Enhancing the Nonobjective Components of Your Application

Letters of Recommendation

The Personal Statement

Preselection Interviews

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Chapter 7

Enhancing the Nonobjective Components of Your Application

This chapter deals with the nonobjective elements of the application, including the personal statement, letters of recommendation, and the preselection interviews that are administered by some programs. There are considerable differences across disciplines, and across various programs within any given field, in terms of the relative importance of the objective and nonobjective components of a graduate school application.

The nonobjective measures often say more about the applicant as a *person*, and sometimes this is the most important information about an applicant. In many respects, these are the most difficult things about an application for the admissions committee to evaluate.

Importantly, these are also the areas where many students can make up for their mediocre grades or standardized test scores. Just as importantly, students who have excellent grades and test scores should understand that they may fail to get into graduate or professional school if any of the nonobjective components of their applications are particularly poor.

Graduate School: Winning Strategies for Getting In

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Letters of Recommendation

Most graduate programs require applicants to obtain from two to four letters of recommendation. The most common requirement is three. Some programs supply a special evaluation form, which the person writing the recommendation (hereafter referred to as the *referee*) is expected to complete, either in addition to or instead of a letter. Most programs ask for similar information.

The key to acquiring three good letters of recommendation is to start planning for them as soon as possible. Even if you need them in just a few weeks, there are still many things you can do to improve your chances of acquiring positive and effective letters. Start thinking about your letters of recommendation, now! It will make a big difference!

You must ask the right individuals to write letters for you, and you must request this favor in an appropriate fashion. This section explains:

1) how admissions committees and prospective graduate supervisors use letters of recommendation, 2) who you should ask for a letter of recommendation, 3) how to ensure that your referees write letters that actually help you, and 4) how to request a letter of recommendation.

A number of different terms may be used to refer to a person who writes a letter of recommendation, including *reference*, *recommender*, or *referee*. This book uses the term *referee*.

How are letters of recommendation used? Unlike transcripts and standardized test scores, which are intended to provide objective measures of your scholarly aptitude, letters of recommendation provide more of a nonobjective evaluation of who you are, your important character traits, your abilities, and your potential for success in graduate school. Some of the people who will be deciding the fate of your application may be more interested in your letters of recommendation than any other component. In some cases, an excellent letter of recommendation can compensate for mediocre performance on the objective criteria such as GPA and standardized test scores.

Chapter 7 **Enhancing the Nonobjective Components**

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On the other hand, it is sometimes argued that letters of recommendation are not very useful for discriminating between applicants because all letters are basically good, and so they have little impact on the outcome of the application. Whether or not the former is true, the latter certainly is not! A single statement in one letter of recommendation can sometimes make the difference between a successful graduate school application and an unsuccessful one.

It pays to think about the contents of your application from the point of view of the prospective supervisor or admissions committee members. After all, they are the people whose positive regard you need to win. Different individuals will be looking for slightly different things, but for the most part, the concerns of all those who read your letters of recommendation will be whether you have demonstrated to someone who is qualified to judge that you possess skills, aptitude, and character traits that are suited to graduate school in general, and to the specific objectives of their program.

Members of the admissions committee will look closely at your letters to determine whether your general aptitudes and interests are suited to their program. Prospective supervisors will look for similar insight into your suitability for their specific area of study or research. The admissions committee will be concerned with how well you are likely to perform as a student in their program. The prospective supervisor will want some indication that taking you on as their graduate student will be of mutual benefit to both of you.

Before deciding who to ask for a letter of recommendation, you need to appreciate the kinds of things that should be in a good recommendation. Most evaluation forms ask the referee how long they have known you, how well they know you, and in what capacity (e.g., as professor for one of your classes, your employer, your Honors thesis supervisor, etc.). They might be asked to describe the population to which you are being compared (e.g., All senior undergraduates in the department? The group of students who are enrolled in the Honors program this year? How many people are in this comparison group?), and to provide a global rating of your ability or potential in relation to that comparison population (e.g., would you be in the top 5%, the top 10%, top 25%, top 50%, bottom 50%?). The evaluation form might ask the referee whether your academic poten-

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