

TIPS ON LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATIONS to UCF LAW SCHOOL APPLICANTS

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Included in your “paper chase” to gain admittance to a law school will be letters of recommendation. The following are some suggestions to organize your process and put it to your best advantage.

Why letters of recommendation? Law schools require particular skills of those they admit to their programs. These include research skills, writing ability, reading comprehension, and oral expression. While GPAs and LSAT scores provide them with some of this information, letters of recommendation provide needed additional information on which to make admittance decisions. Who you select to write letters for you is, therefore, very important.

Who should write them? While some schools will require a “Dean’s letter,” the letters we are concerned about are those that can provide an academic evaluation of you. This is best done by professor’s who are familiar with your work and abilities. That may or may not mean a professor from your major. You should have established a rapport with a faculty mentor(s) by now in your university career from whom you can draw support in this part of your application process. If you have been employed for some period of time, done an internship, been involved in volunteer work, etc., a letter from your supervisor would be another choice. Letters from family, friends, the judge who plays golf with your parents (or you), etc. are generally useless. The “Dean’s letter” if required is usually concerned with student discipline and class standing, those should be handled by Office of Student Conduct. A stamped addressed envelope should be provided with the form.

How many letters? This question has been answered for most law schools in that the Law School Admission Council will accept as many as you (some can be designated for specific schools) using the “Letter of Recommendation Form.” Be aware of the workload on your letter writers, they may get tired of multiple requests for separate letters. In truth, providing more than three letters will not likely change your acceptance chances and may irritate the admissions committee which is reviewing thousands of files. Normally, applicants should get two letters from faculty and one from an employer or someone else who knows you in a supervisory capacity or simply use all faculty.

Electronic submission. Letters can be submitted electronically to the Credential Assembly Service, see the LSAC website for information. Which option is used, electronic or regular mail, is between you and the letter writer. The instructions below are applicable to both methods.

What to provide those writing letters for you? For the writer to be able to craft the letter for maximum effect, you should prepare a **packet of materials** for each individual who has agreed to write on your behalf. Included in this packet should be:

1. A “Letter of Recommendation Form” with the top portion filled out and signed should be provided to each reference or they should receive the electronic notification of the letter request from the LSAC to which they respond. That notification will indicate that you have electronically signed it.
2. If a regular mail letter, a **stamped envelope** with the address of the LSAC to which it is to be sent. This should be **typed** rather than had written for professional appearance and effect.
3. The blank **form questionnaire** found on the LSAC website with your information and signature filled in where required - again, **typed** rather than hand written. If there is no form, simply note this to the letter writers and inform them that letterhead stationary is appropriate.

4. A **list of courses and/or special research projects, etc.** you have undertaken with that particular professor.
5. A copy of your **academic record or transcripts.**
6. A copy of your **resume or personal statement** and your **LSAT score.**
7. The **deadline** for mailing the letter.
8. A copy of **“Thoughts on Writing Successful Letters of Recommendation to Law Schools”** which is attached to this memo.

If additional letters are to be sent, then individual envelopes for the specific law school must be provided to each reference along with any other information specific for that law school.

Strategy. Be sure that those who will be writing letters for you have been given ample time in which to do so and be sensitive as to how many letters you ask of them. Once they have agreed to write on your behalf, it is not improper of you to inquire from time to time as to their progress. **Do not simply assume that they will be done.** Sometimes a reminder is needed to jar one’s memory. Don’t be timid. After all, this is your future you’re talking about. **GOOD LUCK!**

Attachment: “Thoughts on Writing Successful Letters of Recommendation to Law Schools”

THOUGHTS ON WRITING SUCCESSFUL LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION TO LAW SCHOOLS

Writing letters of recommendation is a demanding task. It consumes time that you feel could be better spent on teaching and research. It is unnoticed on annual evaluations and in tenure and promotion decisions. And the lack of feedback from law school admissions committees suggest that letters don't mean anything anyway. Conclusion: It is a thankless paper exercise.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. Letters of recommendation are an important element in law school admission decision-making. Admittedly, most letters are positive. But some of them will be illuminating and, therefore, influence an admissions committee. Since there are far more qualified applicants for first-year law students than there are seats, what is in your letter can make a real difference in that student's chances of occupying one of those seats for the simple reason that, among students with equal statistical qualifications, letters weigh more heavily in comparing them. The few minutes you invest in a written evaluation of a student can make a difference in his or her future. The following suggestions are designed to aid in maximizing those few minutes.

Please note that the law school letter system has changed, a general letter is written and sent to the Law School Admission Council with a "Letter of Recommendation Form.." Your letter will be retained in an archive and sent to the various law schools to whom the student applies for admission. Given this additional step, letters should be sent as soon as possible to insure the individual's application will be complete for review by the law school admissions committee. Most law schools will not consider incomplete files for admission.

Getting Ready.

The student seeking a letter or recommendation has been instructed to provide you with:

1. A "Letter of Recommendation Form" with the top portion completed and signed.
2. a stamped, self-addressed envelope in which to mail your letters,
3. a blank form letter with the student's name and confidentiality consent signed (if provided by the law school,
4. list of courses taken from you and any special research projects undertaken with you,
5. transcripts,
6. resume or personal statement,
7. deadline date for mailing letter.

Strategy.

Your letter or recommendation deals with you, the student, and the reader - take this into account. The applicant will be assessed on their **academic ability**, their **intellectual capacity**, **motivation** and **discipline**, and **communication skills**. Comments on writing ability, research skills, and oral character are of secondary interest (although some schools that provide form letters will specifically inquire about ethics and the applicant as a potential lawyer).

Concentrate upon those areas in which you can be specific and concrete, providing examples and illustrations, rather than speculate in areas unfamiliar to you first-hand.

- a. **Convey facts.** Law school admissions committees are more interested in information and facts than unsupported judgements and adjectives. Every letter they read says how "bright" that applicant is, but few go on to support this judgement with specifics (e.g., the student did a research project for you that was so original and solid that it was submitted to a student paper competition, was presented

at a regional or national professional meeting, was published, etc.). When you say how “mature,” “responsible,” “enthusiastic,” or “thorough” the student is, support the judgement.

- b. **Make comparisons.** It is very helpful to an admissions committee to know how the student ranks among those you have taught over the years or how they rank among those previously in attendance at that specific law school. But, again, back up the judgment. While the reader will perk up upon learning that the applicant is among the best students you have had over the past five years, what does “best” mean? Or that the applicant is the equal of so-and-so presently attending the law school, “equal” in what way?
- c. **Make the student identifiable.** A law school admissions committee is going to process thousands of student files over a few short months, and the names and qualifications soon become a blur. A student you are particularly keen on can easily get lost in the crowd. Have they done something unusual, have a unique talent, overcome an obstacle, or possess an unusual demographic? An admissions committee is going to remember an applicant who took a semester off to go to Alaska and wash oil off birds after the Exxon Valdez accident; or spent two years with the Peace Corps in the interior of Borneo with a tribe of headhunters.
- d. **Identify yourself.** While your letterhead and title will convey general information, your specific role and relationship with the applicant will be more meaningful to an admissions committee. If you were the department’s internship coordinator or honors program director and the student stood out in that program or the student was your research assistant, these identify your basis of judgement.
- e. **Format.** Law schools have no specific letter format nor length. Keep in mind that they will be reading thousands of letters like yours and would love a reason to get it over with quickly - handwritten, strike overs, erasures, very small type, no margins, three pages long, etc. = a cursory glance. In this vein, while admissions committees say they don’t mind a general “To Whom It May Concern” xeroxed letter (which is obviously going to other schools), in this day of computers and high speed desk printers, my bias is to optimize a student’s chances with a tailored letter addressed directly to each law school. The national applicant average is four law schools.

Finally, don’t forget to keep a copy. The “paper chase” is as much getting into law school as staying there and **letters do get lost** in the mountain of paper processing that goes on.

Thank you for your time and effort in supporting this UCF senior’s application process for law school admission. It does make a difference. Should you have any questions or comments, please get in touch with me:

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Adapted from: “Guide to Writing Letters of Recommendation for Law School.” Office of Career Services and Off-Campus Learning, Harvard University. And: “Successful Letters of Recommendation.” Andy Cornblatt, Georgetown University Law Center. in Gerald Wilson (ed.) Handbook for Pre-Law Advisors. Southern Association of Pre-Law Advisors. 1990.