



ACADEMIC CAREERS: Letters of Recommendation

Selecting references

Letter writers should be able to speak deeply and eloquently about your strengths, qualities, and experiences. The individuals you ask to write letters should have first-hand knowledge of your skills – they've seen you teach, co-authored articles with you, worked closely with you on committees, or some other activity. You should be confident that the individuals you ask to write letters can write positive letters on your behalf. If you are unsure, ask them directly.

Faculty job postings usually request three letters, but may request as many as five. For research universities, one of your letters, generally from your dissertation chair (or PI), should address your potential as a researcher with specific evidence for your continued research progress. The second letter should discuss your teaching strengths. The third letter could discuss other skills highlighted in the job description and your cover letter. For example, if you emphasized your leadership in professional organizations, perhaps your third letter should be written by somebody with whom you have served on committees. As an alternative, if you wish to emphasize your solid background as a researcher (or teacher), perhaps your third letter could focus on research and supplement your other letter on research.

If you have two letters addressing the same basic topic, one should be written by somebody outside of your academic department if you want the letters to have maximum impact. Ideally this is someone known in the field and/or from another university.

Reference letter logistics

Start early! Writing recommendation letters is an important job that most faculty members take seriously because they want their students to become successful professionals, so do not be shy about asking for letters. On the other hand, writing thoughtful effective letters takes significant time and energy so it is imperative that you provide your references with sufficient time.

It is best to ask for letters early in your job search, perhaps even before you've seen interesting job postings. At the very least, give your references 2-4 weeks to write, edit, and send each letter. More than 4 weeks will be appreciated.

Provide documentation. You should provide your letter writers with adequate information about your background and the job description so they are able to write vivid, thorough, exceptional letters.

Try to schedule a meeting with each of your letter writers. Provide each of your references with important documents such as a copy of the job description (with the department's website and contact information), your targeted CV, targeted cover letter, research statement, writing samples, teaching statement, teaching portfolio, transcript, etc. Highlight awards, publications, and experiences you want your references to address in their letters.



Follow-up. Let your recommenders know that academic reference letters are usually 1-2 pages in length. Indicate the application deadlines. Tell your letter writers when you intend to submit your application packet and inform them to send their letters when they have them ready (even if it is before you send the rest of your application). You may need to send a follow-up email closer to the deadline to remind each recommender.

Interfolio

Many faculty applications will request that letters of recommendation (and other application materials) be submitted through Interfolio. Interfolio is a document management system that can store confidential letters of recommendation and submit them via postal or electronic mail. You can find out more information at <http://www.interfolio.com/>.

Additional Resources

- > University of California at Berkeley - <http://career.berkeley.edu/PhDs/PhDAcademic.stm>
- > University of Pennsylvania - <http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/careerservices/gradstud/resources/>
- > The Chronicle of Higher Education - <http://chronicle.com>
- > Kelsky, K. (2015). *The professor is in: The essential guide to turning your PhD into a job*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- > Vick, J. M., Furlong, J. S., & Lurie, R. (2016). *The academic job search handbook (5th ed)*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.