

Letter of Reference: Tips and Requirements

Dr. Glen Spielmans
Metropolitan State University
Department of Psychology

Below are a list of characteristics that are valued by graduate programs in psychology and, likely, in closely related fields such as social work, speech pathology, and others. These items are based on a survey of graduate programs (Appleby, Keenan, & Mauer, 1999) and are listed in descending order of importance. Obviously, you need to keep in mind that some of these characteristics may not be relevant to the program to which you apply. If, for instance, you will be attending a graduate program that does *not* at all emphasize conducting research, then point #3 may be much less important to that particular program. You should also consult materials from various programs to which you are applying, as some of them will list what they consider to be particularly important when evaluating applicants. The list follows:

- 1) motivated and hard-working
- 2) high intellectual/scholarly ability
- 3) research skills
- 4) emotionally stable and mature
- 5) writing skills
- 6) speaking skills
- 7) teaching skills/potential
- 8) works well with others
- 9) creative and original
- 10) strong knowledge of area of study
- 11) strong character or integrity
- 12) special skills (e.g., computer or lab)
- 13) capable of analytical thought
- 14) broad general knowledge
- 15) intellectually independent
- 16) leadership ability

Please provide me with examples of how you have met some of the above criteria so that I can best attest to your qualifications as a potential graduate student. I know some applicants much better than others and it is helpful for you to remind me of your qualifications. For example, if you claim to have good writing skills, remind me of a paper you wrote in one of my classes that received high marks. If you claim to be motivated/hard-working, provide some evidence to support that claim, so that I can perhaps discuss it in my letter of reference for your application.

Information to Provide

Please provide the following information to allow me the chance to write the most effective letter of reference for you:

- 1) A list of all programs to which you are applying (and to which I am writing letters for your application), their addresses, and the deadlines for each application

- 2) Whether there is a form for me to complete along with the letter (if there is a form, make sure you have filled in any needed information)
- 3) The specific graduate program to which you are applying (i.e., clinical Ph.D., masters in social work, etc.)
- 4) Your email address and phone number
- 5) Brief essay or set of bullet points in which you briefly describe how you meet some of the criteria above (list as many as possible, but only those for which you have supporting evidence)
- 6) A brief list of classes you have taken from me, research projects upon which we have collaborated, or other ways in which I have witnessed your performance in some way
- 7) A curriculum vitae/resume
- 8) Postage paid envelope in which the letter will be sent with the address completed
- 9) A copy of your academic transcript (an unofficial copy is fine) – it can be sent over email if you'd like.

Thanks to Dr. Drew Appleby of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis for his ideas, which are liberally borrowed throughout the above text.