

HOW TO OBTAIN LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION & REFERENCES

Students and alumni from the Criminology & Criminal Justice (CCJ) program sometimes need a reference or letter of recommendation from a faculty member when applying to graduate school, when seeking an internship, or when they apply for a scholarship¹. Similarly, many criminal justice jobs require professional references and/or detailed background investigations including interviews with former faculty and classmates. While letters and references like these are just one factor in most application reviews, they are usually weighted sufficiently to result in a denial if problems are evident. It is important, therefore, from the outset of your time in the CCJ program that you understand what will help you earn a good reference and recommendation.

There are basically three things you must do to receive a strong academic reference from a faculty member:

1. **Be fully prepared** when you ask for a reference or recommendation
2. **Do well** in courses overall and in the classes of the professor(s) you may later contact for a reference
3. **Stand out** or be memorable

Be Fully Prepared

You should do everything possible to make it easier for people to write a letter on your behalf or serve as a reference. We recommend the following steps:

1. Fully investigate all of the requirements for the application process.
2. Make a list of the 2-3 professors who know you the best and can speak to your particular strengths and accomplishments as a student.
3. Contact the people on your list at least one month in advance of the due date to ask them if they will write a letter on your behalf or serve as a reference.
 - a) It is usually best to make this contact in-person or via the phone rather than through email.
 - b) Explain what the reference is for (e.g., "I am applying to graduate school", "I am interviewing for a job with the FBI").
 - c) Explain why you have chosen that specific person (e.g., "I really enjoyed your CCJ 320 Theories class").
 - d) Inform the person what is expected (e.g., write a letter, fill out rating forms, participate in an interview).
 - e) Provide a clear due date for when the material needs to be submitted.

¹ Academic references and letters of recommendation should be from a professor or instructor. It is usually not appropriate to ask a graduate teaching assistant, staff person, or academic adviser for such a letter.

- f) Recognize that most faculty members are on 9-month contracts with the university and do not get paid during the summer months. As such, there may be delays in hearing back from people during this time.
- 4. Based on your conversations, identify the professor(s) who will be your best advocate.
 - a) Remember that professors provide references on a strictly voluntary basis. If you sense that someone is reluctant to serve as a reference it is probably best to thank him/her and move on.
 - b) If no one from your initial list is willing to serve as a reference then you may need to broaden the pool, work harder to cultivate relationships with faculty, seek out non-academic references, or rethink your plans altogether.
- 5. Once you identify someone who is willing to provide you with a reference send them a package of information to facilitate the process. This should include all of the following:
 - a) A cover letter that includes your contact information, the list of schools/jobs to which you are applying, and due dates for each location.
 - b) A signed release form.²
 - c) All rating forms that are required by the school/employer or the web address necessary for online forms. With the former fill in all of the information you can in advance to save time for your recommender.
 - d) Your unofficial PSU transcripts with courses you took with that person highlighted.
 - e) A draft of your statement of purpose.³
 - f) A copy of your best work from the person's course (e.g., paper, presentation, project).
 - g) Your resume.
 - h) Stamped and addressed envelopes to send letters and forms directly to the schools/employers listed.
- 6. After your application has been completed and the references are submitted send a note of thanks.
 - a) Writing a reference letter can take several hours and, as mentioned previously, this is done solely on a voluntary basis. As such, it is important to show appreciation for the person's efforts on your behalf.
 - b) Most people also like to hear what happens with your application: whether you get into the school or get the job in question.

Do Well in Your Courses

It should be fairly obvious that a student's overall performance at the university and his/her performance in the particular classes of the professor being asked to provide a letter will have a major impact on the content of the reference. Students with a 2.0 GPA ("C" average) will probably get a "C" recommendation while students with a 4.0 GPA and multiple terms on the *President's List* will likely receive a glowing endorsement. Likewise, it is probably best to request references from the professors who taught courses that you excelled in rather than those where you did poorly or received just average grades. All of this

² Federal regulations restrict the academic information faculty can share with the public without a student's formal consent. While some job and graduate school applications include a consent form that covers this, others do not. It is usually best, therefore, to complete the form we have designed for the CCJ program ([link to form](#)) and include this in your package.

³ Most graduate schools and law programs require some type of statement of purpose or personal history that accompanies the application form. Faculty members usually find it helpful to see this paper in advance because it helps them tailor their letter to the student's specific interests, background, and career aspirations.

should serve as a reminder while you are still in school that each and every course grade and your overall GPA matters. Later on it might mean the difference between getting into graduate school or not, or getting that great job with the Feds versus something you are less excited about.

Stand Out or Be Memorable

Faculty members in the CCJ program teach between 4 to 8 classes per year and most of the classes have 40+ students each quarter. This means that for any given year a CCJ faculty member may have contact with 160 to 320 different students. As with many universities, these large numbers have necessitated that some of the grading and day-to-day communications be handled by graduate students under the close supervision of the professor. PSU's quarter system also means that students transfer from one class to the next much sooner than is the case for universities operating on the semester system.

Given this, it should not be surprising that faculty members often find it difficult to remember details about each and every student from their classes. This presents a real challenge when months or even years later a student requests a letter of recommendation or asks to list a faculty member as a reference. If the student never did anything to stand out, the professor is left with two choices, decline the request or write a very generic letter. Here is the kind of generic information one could provide for a student who never really engaged faculty during his/her education at PSU:

"John Doe was recently a student in our Criminology and Criminal Justice Online program (CCJO) at Portland State University. Mr. Doe started taking classes with us in the fall term of 2009 and he graduated with a B.S. degree in the spring of 2011. During his time at PSU he successfully passed all of his courses and graduated with a 3.2 GPA. In my particular class with Mr. Doe, CCJ 340 Crime Analysis, he did well earning a B for his final grade."

Generic letters like this may actually do more harm than good in graduate school applications because it makes it clear to the reviewers that the student's academic history at the given institution was unremarkable. This is why some faculty members will decline to write letters when asked.

Now contrast this with a second student who proactively developed relationships with his/her professors while in school or shortly after graduating. There are many ways to develop relationships at a university and research finds that relationships you establish as a student often have as much influence over your professional development as the content learned in classes. Online students can get to know their faculty through emails, discussion posts to "Ask the Professor" forums in the courses, and all faculty members have office hours posted in their courses during which they can be reached by phone. Similarly, campus students can visit a faculty member during his/her office hours or actively engage in class discussions. Most professors enjoy talking to students about the content from their courses, their research and community service, current events, and about the field of criminal justice in general. Likewise, students can seek guidance from faculty about career options and graduate training. In short, there are many ways students can get to know their professors if they take the initiative. When you talk with your professors after class or in their office hours, introduce yourself each time to be sure that the faculty member knows your name.

As might be expected, it is much easier for a faculty member to write a strong recommendation letter for a good student they know on a personal basis. For example, here is an actual letter submitted on behalf of a recent graduate from the CCJ online program:

"Dear Application Committee Members,

It is with the greatest pleasure that I have been asked to write a letter of recommendation for Jane Doe. My experience in teaching and advising Jane over the past year has led me to conclude that she is an exceptional student. I heartily recommend her for graduate level work in law school.

I first became acquainted with Jane this past January while she was enrolled in CCJ 380 Research Methods. As you might expect, the content covered in this class is usually not a favorite among students and many of them struggle to think critically about cause and effect relationships. This was not the case for Jane; she was already processing information in a logical manner and was exceptionally good at critical thinking. During the class Jane also made many valuable contributions to discussions and she was clearly a leader in her team projects. She ended up with an A in the class and was ranked 15th out of 109 students.

Jane took a second class with me, CCJ 340 Crime Analysis, this past summer. This course introduces students to descriptive statistics and data analysis using MS Excel. Students work independently on homework assignments that require analysis of large criminal justice datasets. As in her prior class with me, Jane again excelled with this content. She clearly has advanced computer and analysis skills that should prove valuable in graduate training. By the end of the class she was ranked 3rd out of 95 students, resulting in another A.

As Jane's academic advisor over the past year I can also attest to her exceptional performance in classes taught by my colleagues and in courses taken at prior schools. Jane transferred to Portland State University (PSU) after taking classes at several other colleges across a number of years. Her earlier transfers and breaks from school were the result of serious medical problems that required treatment and the fact that she has full responsibility for two young children. Despite these challenges, she was able to maintain a 3.8 GPA up until the point she joined PSU. Since coming to PSU she has completed 92 additional credit hours through the summer term earning her a 3.9 GPA. This easily ranks her in the top 5% of our students.

At this point it should be obvious that Jane is an outstanding student with a real knack for academic study. It is equally important to highlight that she is also an exceptionally well-rounded individual with intellectual and social interests beyond school. For example, last fall she played a central role in organizing local political rallies during the gubernatorial election. She has volunteered for a number of other organizations including her local school system. Adding further diversity to her background is her prior internship with the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigations.

In summary, Jane is a highly motivated, intellectually gifted, socially conscious, and well-rounded individual with clear passion for learning. I am confident that these characteristics will make her an exceptional law student and someday she will be an outstanding lawyer."

Finally, it is important to highlight that simply being memorable is not enough; it must be for the right reasons. Students who are repeatedly late with assignments, those requesting multiple extensions or incomplete grades at the end of the term, students who are disrespectful to faculty or other students, and those who engage in academic misconduct certainly stand out, but they are unlikely to earn positive recommendations from the faculty.