

We've said it several times: the most important message your application can convey is that you have what it takes to make an intellectual contribution to a research lab. We mentioned that the admissions committee uses several pieces of information to determine this, the most important of which is likely to be your letters of reference. If you have a strong letter from someone both known and respected by the admissions committee, you'll be in great shape. But what else makes or breaks a letter of recommendation? In this chapter we'll first discuss who writes the most influential letters, then we'll give you advice on how to go about asking for a strong letter. We'll provide detail on what you should be doing to maximize the impact of the letter. However, we should warn you now, there's no magic bullet. If you're not a strong student, there's no magic phrase to utter to obtain a golden recommendation. We'll simply help you get the best set of recommendations you possibly can.

When the admissions committee looks at a letter they look at three things: 1) who wrote the letter, 2) how well the letter writer knows you, and 3) what the letter says about you. The first point validates the letter writer, the second point validates that they can say something about you, and the third point is the actual message.

Who Writes the 'Best' Letters?

We're going to ignore the content for a moment and just focus on the person writing the letter. Broadly speaking, when evaluating applications, we pay most attention to letters from academic faculty who have supervised your research. Ranking second are letters from academic faculty from whom you've taken courses. Ranking a distant third are letters from industry (unless the letter is from a Ph.D. in an industrial research lab – which would bump the importance of the letter up to that of an academic faculty from whom you've taken a course). Least significant are letters from community or religious leaders. Letters from teaching assistants or postdocs are difficult to interpret. Most of these students are less experienced letter writers and tend to provide glowing, but uninformative, letters. Why is this the priority we place on letters of reference? It comes back to two things: 1) what the letter tells us about your ability to function in an academic research environment and 2) the trustworthiness of the reference. So ideally, you'd have worked with the three top faculty in your research area and you would have letters from them stating that you are the next Einstein. That's not likely to happen. And that's ok.

Why is it so much better to get a letter from a well-known research professor? These individuals have significant experience and know which stu-