Things to Consider When Selecting a Reference Writer

American Physical Society Bridge Program

Reference letters are an important part of your application to graduate school in physics. It’s important to take time to reflect on the best person to write a strong letter. A few things to keep in mind when selecting a reference writer are below.

HELPFUL HINTS

• **Pick someone who knows you well.** People that know you well will be able to write a more personal, meaningful letter. Someone who cannot pick you out of their 300-person introductory physics course will not be able to speak strongly to your strengths unless you know them personally. An advisor, research mentor, someone you’ve known for years, or through multiple classes would be a strong reference.

• **Choose a research mentor.** Doctoral studies are research degrees, and admissions committees are looking to evaluate your research capabilities. At least one letter writer should be someone who is familiar with your abilities to carry out independent research.

• **Give reference writers ample time.** It’s never a good idea to let your reference know that you need a reference by tomorrow. Planning far ahead enough to give them several weeks or a month to write the letter speaks strongly to your organizational skills and foresight. Giving your letter writer a short time deadline is likely to result in a letter that is rushed, and possibly missing critical elements.

• **Look for experience.** A letter from a professor who has been teaching for 20 years is likely to carry more weight than a teaching assistant or graduate student mentor.

• **Don’t rule out faculty in whose courses you received less than an A.** Getting a B in someone’s class should not rule them out as a possible reference writer. Personal stories and meaningful relationships are more important than letter grades in many cases, and getting a high grade alone sometimes isn’t enough to justify asking for a letter.

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THINGS TO AVOID

- **Using a personal reference.** Never ask a family member or someone who does not know you in an academic, work, or professional capacity to write a reference letter.

- **Asking someone who is uncertain they can give you a positive reference.** If someone hesitates to write you a reference letter or expresses doubts about their ability to write you a strong letter of reference, do not use this person as a reference. Reference letters should always be positive - a lukewarm, neutral, or even slightly negative letter will work against you. Asking if the person would be willing to write a positive letter of recommendation is a good way to address this issue with a potential reference writer.

Additional information

Additional tips for selecting a letter writer can be found at:

http://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools/choosing-a-recommender.aspx