

The graduate school application letter is essentially a pitch letter. However, unlike pitching a new service or writing a cover letter for a job in the “real world,” graduate school is not the “real world.” A group of faculty members (or a graduate advisor/director) make admission decisions. Professors in the humanities are often looking for more than just decent GPAs and high GRE scores—although you should not make the mistake of thinking that these are not important—Professors are also looking to see that you know something about their department and faculty members. In order to write an effective letter, consider the following suggestions.

- **Do not misspell or misuse the name of the department** (“communications” for example, or call a department of “Human Communication” a department of “Communication Studies” or [gasp] “Speech Communication”).
- **Do not say that you are “undecided”** (get decided or get a real job and figure it out). You can usually change areas of specialization once you are in the program (sometimes it’s hard), and professors want to be convinced that you know what you are doing).
- **Clearly articulate why you want to come to the school.** Be specific. Do not speak of “how interesting the department looks,” or “what great classes are offered.” Professors want to know who you want to work with, what specialization area you are interested in pursuing, what you want to write your thesis/dissertation on, etc. Professors want you to tell them what you are interested in studying. Additionally, it does not hurt to mention the professors you would like to work with—this shows that you are familiar with the program. For example: “I have read several of professor Taylor’s articles in my public relations classes and it would be an honor to work with her. Her work on activism has been very influential in my thinking...”
- **Include writing samples that show your ability to conduct graduate level work.** Ideally you will submit a conference paper that was accepted at a regional or national conference. Any conference paper will do in a pinch. If you do not have a conference paper then submit your best class paper or professional document. Avoid trite/ephemeral topics (critiques of movies, television programs, songs, etc.).
- **Structure the letter to focus on three or four key points** just like you learned to do in public speaking class. Be sure to have a proper introduction/conclusion, proper transitions, etc. You are asking to be accepted into a community that makes its living by writing and teaching. You are trying to convince us that you can do both (all graduate degrees are teaching degrees). You will best demonstrate this by showing proper scholarly form in your essay.
- **Get useful letters of recommendation.** Letter writing is an art; do not go to an amateur. If you want to get into a communication program, get communication teachers to write you letters. A useful letter comes from someone who knows something about graduate school in the humanities and knows you well. Your boss at the diner who has a Master’s degree in business will not impress a professor deciding whether you should be admitted into the Doctoral program in interpersonal communication. Similarly, university presidents, CEOs, deans, and administrators write notoriously bad letters. Most administrators are out of touch with graduate school. Many administrators are too busy to write a good letter, or even to write the letter themselves. Professors do not care if you are “hard working,” “the best student assistant ever,” etc. Big deal. It only takes a “competent” student to be the best assistant ever. Every student thinks that s/he is above average—that is what teachers tell everyone these days. We want to be told that “your writing skills are among the best so-and-so has seen...”; “you have a clear idea of what you want to study...”; “your level of maturity is exceptional and is reflected in the topics you choose to study...” etc.
- **Avoid hyperbole.** Professors are not stupid and we know when someone is “blowing smoke” at us.
- **Do not write about your dreams** (“As a child I knew that I wanted to work with people...”).
- **Unless you are applying to a religious school** (and even then, avoid it) do not say “god bless,” “in sha Allah,” etc.
- **Do not write about yourself in the third person** (“Let me tell you about a young man who...”).
- **Do not use a narrative style** (“Once upon a time there was a hard working student...”).
- **Never, never, never, have spelling errors or proofing errors.** If I have to explain this, you should not be thinking about graduate school.
- **Ask the professor in your department who writes the best to proofread and critique your letter before you submit it.**