

# Ask Professor Sarah Bellum



Professor Sarah Bellum answers your questions on navigating the often-uncharted waters of early career development. Professor Bellum is communicated by Patricia L. Clark, founder of the Early Careers Committee and a member of Council. Do you have a question for Professor Bellum? Send it to [sarah\\_bellum@biophysics.org](mailto:sarah_bellum@biophysics.org). Your privacy is assured!

## How to Get a Letter that Glows

**Q:** I am preparing to apply for postdoctoral positions, and need to get letters of recommendation from two people on my thesis committee. One member readily agreed to write a letter, but the other was really surly about it. “Professor Grumpy” said that over the past five years he has seen me only at my two formal committee meetings, and that was hardly the basis for writing a strong letter. I see his point, but what can I do about it now?

**A:** Letters of recommendation will be an incredibly important part of your professional life throughout your career. Your CV or résumé provides an abbreviated, objective catalog of your career progress, but it is in your letters of recommendation that your unique attributes, professional triumphs, and interpersonal skills can shine through. In these letters, your contributions can be placed in the context of your field, and your progress and promise can be compared to that of others at your career stage. Even one strong, glowing letter can make a so-so CV stand out from the crowd, and clinch an interview—and just as fast, a collection of mediocre letters can torpedo an application, even if it comes with a

very strong CV. So what are the qualities that distinguish a glowing letter from a mediocre letter?

Glowing letters are written by letter writers who have substantial personal knowledge of the applicant and his/her work. Try to see your situation from the perspective of your surly committee member. If the last time Professor Grumpy thought about you was two years ago at your last committee meeting, it is unlikely that he will be able to allot time in his short-term schedule to get to know you and your thesis project to the extent needed to write a strong, thoughtful letter. And at any given moment, Professor Grumpy is balancing several competing commitments, all of which demand more of his time than he can devote to them. He might be writing a grant proposal, preparing lectures, writing reports for a departmental committee, or updating a presentation for an upcoming seminar trip. More likely, he is trying to do all of these things, and more, simultaneously. Out of the blue, you show up and ask for a letter. Writing even a so-so letter will take time away from something else on his calendar, a sure recipe for making Grumpy even grumpier. The shorter the timeline, the grumpier he will get—and the less likely it is that your letter will glow.

Now instead, imagine a different scenario: imagine that approximately every six months after your last formal contact with your committee members you sent a brief progress summary to each of them, updating them on project goals, your recent progress, and planned future directions. Imagine that when something noteworthy occurred in your professional life, you sent them a brief email to let them know that your study on X was just published in Journal Y (PDF attached), or that you attended conference Z and won an award for your poster presentation. Imagine that you went out of your way to chat with Professor Grumpy and your other commit-

tee members when you saw them at seminars and department functions. Imagine that you read up on Professor Grumpy's research area, asked him for advice when you encountered a snag in your research that related to his expertise, and thanked him for his contributions in the Acknowledgements section of publication resulting from that study (a copy of which you sent to him, along with a note thanking him for his help). Imagine that when you wanted some of Professor Grumpy's time, you sent him an email asking to make an appointment at a time convenient to him, following up with a polite reminder email if you did not receive a response. If there was still no response, you tried dropping by his office to set up an appointment in person. A common theme throughout this scenario is realizing that a substantial letter of recommendation, and definitely a glowing letter, arises from a solid relationship between the student and his/her letter writer, while simultaneously respecting Professor Grumpy's competing time demands.

This is all very nice for the future, but what about your current situation? Professor Grumpy hasn't had a progress update from you in years, and your goal was to send out your applications in the next two weeks. What can you do now to salvage your situation? Your best bet is to book an appointment with Professor Grumpy ASAP to explain your situation and ask for his advice on how to proceed. What you are most interested in is establishing a reasonable timeline for Professor Grumpy to write the strongest possible letter. Emphasize that you would rather have a strong, thoughtful letter than a quickly written, so-so letter, and make it as easy as possible for him to write a glowing letter by providing him with your current CV, publications, and a brief summary of your thesis research. Make it crystal-clear why you especially value a letter written by Grumpy ("I am a bit concerned that my application will be at a disadvantage because my most significant

manuscript is still under review. Given your expertise in XYZ, I am hoping you might feel comfortable mentioning in your letter the contributions and future impact of my work on our understanding of XYZ"). Give him some background information on the job/fellowship you are applying for, application deadlines, and where to send or submit his letter. Email all of this to him so he can easily cut-and-paste the relevant information into his letter.

But respect Grumpy's schedule. If he is out of town or too busy to meet with you, send him an email explaining your situation, letting him know that you understand that you were remiss in keeping him up to date and tardy in your request for letters.

Then, based on what you hear, recalibrate your own timeline: If Grumpy is already swamped with writing his grant renewal proposal, it might be a

month before he can produce your letter. Go ahead and submit your applications, but include a note indicating when your letters will arrive. If the deadline is rigid and you know Grumpy's letter will not arrive in time, consider delaying your application until the next review cycle. This might mean delaying your thesis defense, or staying on in your current lab after your defense. You absolutely must discuss this decision with your PhD advisor; other variables, including your relationship with your PhD advisor and his/her current funding status, are involved.

Finally, keep in mind that the first glowing letter will take the most time to produce. Even substantial updates to an existing letter are nowhere near as time-consuming as producing a brand-new letter. Yet one more reason to start the letter-writing process early: If you start with a glowing letter, it will likely keep glowing for a good long time.

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