How to Ask For—and Receive—Strong Letters of Recommendation

1) Approach potential recommenders first as advisers. Go to their office hours. Get to know them and let them get to know you. Discuss your larger interests and goals, and ask their advice about potential projects, assigned or further readings, courses of study, graduate programs, etc. These conversations will be invaluable in themselves, but they will also allow you to judge who is likely to be your most enthusiastic recommenders. These meetings will also help those who write for you to write more informed and personally engaged letters.

2) Ask someone who knows you well and who will be able to discuss in specific detail what distinguishes you. A faculty member from whom you received an A in an upper-division course is likely to have the materials at his or her disposal to write you a strong letter. Better still if you consulted that faculty member during office hours or worked with him or her in a research setting. Faculty from whom you have only taken an online course may not be able to provide rich detail in their letters. Most programs and scholarships request letters from faculty; business programs typically request letters from associates and supervisors in the business world.

3) Ask: “Do you feel you know me (or my academic record, my leadership qualities) well enough to write a strong letter of recommendation for the __ Scholarship/__graduate program?” Never ask for a “letter of recommendation.” Ask for a “strong letter of recommendation.” You have now given the professor the opportunity to decline gracefully. If the answer is “no,” find a new recommender. This inquiry may be done via email, provided you already have an established relationship with the potential recommender.

4) Ask well in advance of the deadline. One month ahead of the deadline is a good rule-of-thumb. It is a good idea to consult with the recommender to see how much lead-time is needed. This is especially true for letters for major fellowships and for letters to be written over the summer, when faculty may be away and hard to reach.

5) Schedule a meeting with each recommender to discuss the scholarship, its selection criteria, your most recent and commendable activities, and to suggest what each recommender might emphasize. (You may want to let your recommenders know who your other recommenders are, so that they can write letters that complement rather than repeat one another.)

6) Bring to this meeting:

- A current resume or list of your activities and honors. Include internships and work/research experience, community service, conference papers or presentations, other creative accomplishments, and leadership experiences.
A copy of your personal statement, project proposal, and/or course of study proposal, or other descriptive information from the application (information about career plans, foreign travel experience, or non-academic interests is sometimes requested). If you have not yet completed these materials, provide an informal draft version in the form of a 1-2 page statement.

Pertinent reminders about the work you have done for this professor that will help him or her highlight what makes you a strong candidate. Past papers and exams are essential, preferably with the professor’s comments. Feel free to draft paragraphs that would appear in your ‘dream recommendation.’ This will help make sure that your recommenders highlight the past projects, leadership roles, and other experiences that you would like them to emphasize.

A copy of your transcript (if applying for nationally competitive fellowship) or, at the minimum, a list of courses you have taken, particularly at the upper-division level. This can be an unofficial copy or STAR report, and is to give your recommender an overview of your academic program to-date, as well as your grades. If your grades are not what you think they should be, be ready to identify any extenuating circumstances (e.g., family or other responsibilities, number or level of courses taken). Your recommender can put less than admirable grades in context for the committee.

The official description of the criteria the recommender’s letter should address and the deadline by which the letter is due. Supplement this description with your own suggestions as to what you would like your recommender to emphasize.

Any coversheets or official recommendation forms that should accompany the letter. Be sure to complete any section that pertains to you: name, address to which the letter should be sent, etc. Each scholarship or program is different. Make sure you have waived your right to access under the Family Right and Privacy Act. Selection committees often fail to take non-restricted letters seriously.

If you are asking for more than one letter (as for graduate school or multiple fellowships), provide the following information on a separate sheet, as well as stamped and addressed envelopes for each fellowship.
  o To whom each letter should be addressed (individual or committee, relevant titles, address, etc.)
  o Whether each letter should be mailed directly to the funding agency (as in the case of the Rhodes, NSF, Mellon) or remitted to the Office of National Scholarships (Dr. M) for inclusion in the application packet (Truman, Udall, Goldwater, Marshall).
  o The deadline. Be sure to distinguish between a “postmark” and “received by” due date.

7) Finally, write your recommenders a note of thanks and keep them posted on the outcome.

Adapted from a handout provided by Jane Curlin, Williamette University