

Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation provide a window to how students' mentors, instructors, and research supervisors assess their intellectual capabilities and their potential for contributing to a field of study or an area of public service.

In addition to the great care required as students prepare application materials, they must attend to the niceties and the realities of securing letters of recommendation. You should choose recommenders who know you well. You must remember, however, that the people whom you ask are busy-not only with their own classes and research projects, but also with their own grant and fellowship deadlines.

A letter casually requested will be casually written. Students should not wait until the last minute to request a letter of reference. You should not stick a form under a potential recommender's door unless you have been asked to do so.

Requests should be made in a timely and helpful fashion. Students should make an appointment to speak with their potential recommenders. The purpose of the conference is not only to ask for a letter of recommendation but also to engage in a substantive conversation that will help you clarify your goals and what you intend to accomplish during the period of the fellowship or grant. An effective letter details your prowess and potential in the field and demonstrates detailed knowledge about how you are poised to accomplish what you propose. It is your responsibility to see that your supporters know enough about your plans to write letters that speak to your unique suitability for the opportunity at hand.

Students must prepare for this appointment. You should bring with you a draft of your essay or proposal draft, an activity sheet, and a description of the fellowship or grant for which you are applying. This meeting provides a forum during which you can update your mentor on the intellectual problems that excite you. Discussing thoroughly what issues are passionate to students with mentors will help both in clarifying plans.

It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the letters arrive on time. Students should set a timetable for themselves and their recommenders. You need to give your recommenders ample time to prepare a strong letter of support. Confidentiality, timeliness, and readability are at stake.

Letters must be sent in hard copy, never e-mailed or faxed. Recommenders should not use pre-written recommendation letters. Students must be sure that each recommender knows to whom the letter should be addressed and to what agency or campus organization it should be sent. The student should supply stamped and addressed envelopes.

Letters of recommendation are vital documents in any application package. It is your responsibility to see that your supporters have enough knowledge about your plans to write letters that speak to your unique suitability to the award program.