

How to ask for—and get—strong letters of recommendation

- 1) **Approach potential recommenders first as advisers.** Get to know them and let them get to know you. Discuss your larger interests and goals. Ask for their advice about potential projects, reading, courses of study, graduate programs. . . . 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 allow those who write for you to write more informed and more personally engaged letters.
- 2) **Ask someone who knows you well** and who will be able to discuss in specific detail what distinguishes you.
- 3) **Ask well in advance of the deadline.** Two to four weeks may be adequate. But it is often helpful 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.
- 4) 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 X scholarship?”** You’ve now given the professor the opportunity to decline gracefully. If the answer is “no,” don’t push. This inquiry may be done via email—if you already have an established relationship with the potential recommender.
- 5) **Schedule an appointment with your recommenders** 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 a list of your activities and honors. Be sure to include internships or work/research experience, community service, conference papers/presentations, other creative or 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 version in the form of a 1-2 page statement.
 - Any pertinent reminders about the work you have done for this professor that will help you highlight what makes you a strong candidate; past papers or exams are especially helpful.
 - A copy of your transcript (if applying for a nationally competitive fellowship). This can be an unofficial copy 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).
 - 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 is different. Make sure you have waived your right to access under the Family Rights 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:
 - To whom each letter should be addressed (individual or committee, relevant titles, address).
 - 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 International Education and Fellowship Programs for inclusion in the application packet (Truman, Goldwater, Udall, Marshall).
 - The deadline. Be sure to distinguish between a “postmark” and a “received by” due date.
- 7) Finally, be sure to **write your recommenders a note of thanks** and let them know what happens.