

How to Help Faculty Help You: Recommendation Letters

Recommendation letters are a critical component of graduate school and fellowship applications. It allows the admissions and review committees to get to know you better from the perspective of those you have worked for or taken classes from. A good recommendation letter can elevate your application and provide helpful context to complement your personal statement, transcript and CV or resume.

Tips for requesting recommendation letters:

- Seek out faculty who can speak *meaningfully* about you and your experiences.
- Ask early: two months in advance is ideal but give no less than two weeks' notice (relative to your earliest deadline). It takes time to write a strong and effective letter. Please don't put recommenders in the position of having to rush this process.
- Be open that some people may not feel they know you well enough to write on your behalf. If recommenders decline, be grateful; you don't want a lukewarm or mediocre letter. Their honesty is essential to your success.
- The more specific information recommenders have from you, the stronger they can make your letter.
- Consider completing the attached form and submitting to each recommender at least two weeks prior to the deadline for your earliest application. Ask the recommender if there is any other information they would like to have in order to write your letter.

What do I put in the letter to my recommender?

- 1) Here is a full list of applications for which recommendation letters are required, **in chronological order**
 - If you change your mind about deadlines or schools after giving this form to recommenders, it is essential that you provide an updated copy to them ASAP.
- 2) Why am I applying to these schools?
 - Be as specific as possible. For example:
 - Why are you planning to study [your field and topic] at [specific school]?
 - Are there particular faculty or topics that you're excited to work on or with?
 - If this letter is being written for a later stage in your career, why do you want to teach in [X department] at [Y specific school]? Why do you want [X fellowship] at [Y institution]?
- 3) Why am I asking you to write one of my letters of recommendation?
 - If a recommender has agreed to write your letter, it will be very helpful for them to understand why YOU think they are especially well-positioned to tell persuasive stories about you as a compelling candidate for this position.
 - List all classes you have taken with this recommender (CRN and Title)
 - For those classes (including independent studies and honors theses) that have felt particularly meaningful for your growth, you want to include at least a few sentences about each. Strive here for concrete examples and memorable vignettes. This is an opportunity to demonstrate specific things you are proud of about your work in that particular class. Avoid generalization and ungrounded abstract statements.

- Emphasize particular work you did in their class that you are proud of, research you worked on together or transformative experiences you've had that are connected to work you have shared, etc.
- 4) Here are three to five professional and personal traits or skills that might be helpful for you to know about.
- For each, provide at least one specific piece of evidence to show how you exhibited this trait in the class, meetings, research or teaching. For example, you showed your strong organizational skills (or a hard work ethic, understanding of a range of research methods, excellent oral communications skills or the ability to collaborate with peers, etc.) through designing and completing [a specific assignment].
 - Recommenders may emphasize only some of these traits, but it helps to know what you think is important.
- 5) Is there anything else your recommenders should know?
- Are there other details or experiences that you didn't mention in any of the above questions? Include those here.
- 6) Please see attached for my:
- Attach your statement of purpose (or application essay, etc.) and resume or CV. Drafts, even rough ones, are helpful.
 - You may also attach an unofficial transcript.
 - Include a list of the attachments so the recommender knows what has been included.

Other tips for filling out this form:

- Answers will be most helpful if you employ the "tell me, show me, so what?" template here. Answer the question (tell me). Give a series of well-selected concrete examples that you unpack to help bring your answer to vivid life (show me). Then add a sentence or two giving a sense of why this story helps to show your fit with the school/job/internship/fellowship/thing you want help applying for and/or your ambitions as a thinker/teacher/whatever you're having me write this for (so what?).
- Remember that a letter of recommendation is a formal, professional document. Thus, personal stories may not actually help recommenders write a persuasive, professional document. An exception to this may be a program or fellowship for which you hold a deep personal connection (e.g., the DARE Fellowship at Stanford University); in that case, personal details will be quite helpful.
- Even if you've already answered some of these questions in a previous email or meeting, it will be helpful for recommenders to have this information all together in one place.

** Adapted from feedback and materials generated by Professor Janice McCabe (Associate Professor, Dartmouth), Professor Michelle Warren (Professor, Dartmouth) and Bridget Whearty (Associate Professor, Binghamton University).

Thank you for agreeing to write a recommendation letter for me! Here is some helpful information that I hope will be of use as you write my letter.

Student Name: _____ Degree Sought (MA, MS, PhD. Etc): _____

Research Area/Program Type: _____

- 1) Here is a full list of applications for which recommendation letters are requested, in chronological order:**

Institution Name	Program/Degree or Fellowship	Application Deadline	Format/Timing for Rec Letter Upload

- 2) Why am I applying to these schools/fellowships?**

Institution/Fellowship Name	Why are you applying to <i>this</i> institution/fellowship?

3) Why am I asking you to write one of my letters of recommendation?

CRN/Title	Additional Notes

4) Here are 3-5 professional/personal traits or skills that might be helpful for you to know about me:

5) Other relevant details:

6) Please see attached for my: