

Asking for Letters of Evaluation¹

Selection committees depend heavily on evaluation letters to gain insight into applicants' personal strengths, weaknesses, and accomplishments. This kind of information cannot be readily gleaned from transcripts and test scores, so it is in your best interest to help your recommenders write the most accurate and detailed letters possible.

You should begin to cultivate close working relationships with faculty and staff early in your undergraduate career. Once you've become acquainted with faculty and staff members through coursework, research, or other ways, consider stopping by their offices once a semester to discuss your interests and to keep in touch. When the time comes, you need not feel shy about requesting a recommendation. All faculty and staff members, and graduate students had the same service done for them in the past, and they regard this as a familiar process.

Refer to the following guidelines for managing your letter requests.

1. **Choose the people who know you best.** Many students wonder whether they should ask a "big name" professor who knows only their face and final grade or a less-known professor who knows them better. Letters by famous people or well-known scholars only carry more weight if the famous person knows you well and can write a substantial, convincing letter. The more detailed and personalized a letter is, the more likely it is to make a strong impression on a selection committee, so you should ask your instructors with the most extensive, personal knowledge of you and your work.

2. **Ask early.** It is common courtesy to allow recommenders at least three weeks to prepare and submit their letters. We highly recommend involving them in the early stages of your application process, while you are deciding what to write about and how to present yourself in the application materials. Their insights will prove invaluable, and they will be well informed of your interests when they write their recommendations. You should thus begin your request with a substantial conversation about your interests and goals, and then ask them if they can write a strong letter of recommendation. Most likely they will say yes. In some cases, however, the faculty/staff member may say no or that he or she can only write an evaluation citing certain qualifiers or weaknesses. In this case, you should accept his/her judgment graciously and consider asking for more feedback about your goals and plan for study.

3. Once **faculty/staff have agreed to write your letters, provide them with copies of your application materials.** The following items will help them to write accurate and purposeful letters:

- photocopies of key pages from the application brochure, describing the nature and purpose of the scholarship/program
- a copy (or a draft) of your application essays, or a summary of your career and educational goals
- a list of your activities (sports, organizations, leadership and volunteer positions, jobs, etc.)
- a description of pertinent work or research experiences
- a copy of your transcript
- if a number of semesters has passed since you worked with a recommender, you should also provide her/him with a copy of your paper or class project

4. **Write out all submission instructions and deadlines.** There should be no question as to when and where to submit the finished letters. Provide properly addressed, typed, and stamped envelopes. If you have opened a file for your letters at the University Health Professions Office, provide the evaluator with a copy of your "Evaluation Packet and Committee Letter Release Form" and highlight instructions on how to submit their letter to the UHPO. *Applicants are not allowed to deliver their letters of evaluation to the UHPO.*

5. **Keep in touch with your recommenders.** After submitting your application, send your evaluators a thank you note expressing your appreciation for their guidance and support. Update them on your progress throughout the stages of the application process and inform them whether you are selected for the program/award or not. Should you need an evaluation in the future, this kind of follow-up communication will continue to foster a close, positive relationship with your faculty/staff sponsors.

¹ From "Fellowships and Graduate School Application Services: Asking for Letters of Recommendation" from the Undergraduate Research Programs (www.stanford.edu/dept/undergrad/urp/fgsr/FGSRIntro.htm), Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 2004. Adapted by UTSA University Health Professions Office, San Antonio, Texas, March 2007.