



Guidelines for Requesting Letters of Recommendation

Letters of Recommendation are the chance for fellowship selection committees to see candidates from an outside perspective. Writers of such letters should vouch for your qualifications for the fellowship and can be especially helpful to the committee when they are able to speak from their area of expertise and offer affirmation of the viability of your fellowship success.

The first step to a great letter of recommendation is creating relationships with potential recommenders. The most compelling letters come from individuals who know you very well and are able to write detailed letters with concrete examples that attest to your character traits. The longer your history and closer your interactions with a recommender, the more content they will have to write a convincing letter of support. Get to know professors, advisors, supervisors, volunteer coordinators, and similar individuals who can become familiar with your interests and goals, work ethic and drive, and personality/character. These potential recommenders may also provide valuable mentorship and guidance outside of the letter of recommendation.

Be strategic about the people from whom you request letters of recommendation. Don't just consider the people who know you best. You should AVOID asking for letters from family, friends, or others who have a conflict of interest. But don't rely too heavily on reputation either. Selection committees will not be impressed by a generic letter from the local Congressman/Congresswoman you interned with one summer. Rather, find an appropriate balance of your requested individual's familiarity with you and their background knowledge/expertise. It is better to ask for a letter from a professor, student group advisor, or another reputable source who can place you within the context of a wider group of individuals, rather than a teaching assistant or fellow executive board officer of a student group who a fellowship committee will know has less experience with a wide variety of students.

It may be helpful to think of your application package as a whole to determine whom to ask for a letter of recommendation. Figure out what points you want to convey to the committee and particular parts of your application that may be most appropriate and effective for showcasing them. What is best said by other people through the letter of recommendation versus being communicated in your own words (personal statement), by your studies/grades (transcripts), or by your involvement/accomplishments (résumé)? Think about who is in the best position to speak on certain aspects of your character as well as aim to ask a diverse mix of recommenders to talk from various angles/perspectives, thereby building a more comprehensive sense of who you are as a candidate.

Although you are not the writer of your letters of recommendation, there is a lot of responsibility that still falls largely with you. It is important for you to remember that recommenders who agree to write a letter for you are essentially volunteering their time and energy for your benefit. You should be highly considerate and do whatever you can to make the process as convenient as possible for the recommender. This in turn helps to ensure that you are creating the best conditions possible for getting the strongest letters of recommendation.

- **Give your recommender sufficient time to write the letter for you.** It is advised to make your request at least THREE to FOUR weeks in advance; however, it may be best to consult with your recommenders to discuss their availability/schedule, especially if letters are to be written over academic breaks or during peak busy periods.
- **Supplement your request with other useful information for the recommender to know.** Fill in the individual with pertinent information such as specific criteria that is emphasized for the fellowship or special instructions for submitting the letter of recommendation. Familiarize yourself with the procedures for submission so that you include all necessary documents and can explain the process to the recommender.

- **Offer information about yourself and how the recommender can best help your application, but don't be pushy about it.** Reminding your recommender how you have worked together and providing guidance on points you'd like the recommender to focus on may be helpful; however, be careful not to come across as though you are dictating the content nor should you follow up an unreasonable amount of times for the letter.
- **Accept "no" as an answer.** Sometimes a recommender has too much on their plate or does not know you well enough to confidently write a compelling letter of support. If a recommender does turn down your request, it is probably for the better since you want all parts of your application to be strong. Thank him/her for their time and find another person to write a letter on your behalf.
- **Remember to thank your recommender!** Show proper manners by thanking your recommender. Also, follow up with the status of your application because they care enough to want to know.

Steps to requesting a letter of recommendation:

- Determine the requirements for the letters of recommendation for each fellowship you are interested in. Some fellowships will require specific content (eg. Rhodes asks for at least one letter on an applicant's character) or specific sources (eg. Marshall asks for at least two letters from academic references).
- Come up with a list of possible individuals from whom to request a letter of recommendation. It may help to rank the individuals or make notes on the angles/aspects from which the recommender can write. You should also have a few back-up recommenders in case someone you are initially thinking of is unable to write you a letter.
- Make the request to your recommender at least THREE to FOUR weeks in advance of the deadline. Meet with each recommender to discuss why you are applying, how the fellowship fits into your long-term goals, and why you have selected him/her, if needed.
- Provide the following to your recommender:
 - Guidelines for Fellowship Letter of Recommendation Writers. This is available on the SFO website. Fill in your name, scholarship, deadline for the letter, and fellowship criteria and other notes on the form.
 - Copy of your personal statement/essays or information on:
 - Why this specific fellowship is fit for you (eg. why you want to study at Oxford for Rhodes)
 - How you are prepared/qualified for the particular fellowship
 - Goals 5-10 years from now
 - Experiences in leadership, creativity, and motivation
 - Overall GPA and copy of transcripts
 - Résumé/CV/list of activities
 - Special instructions for submission and necessary additional documents (eg. if instructed to submit in sealed envelope across the seal, provide stamped, self-addressed envelope)
- Follow up with a thank you note and the status of your fellowship application.

The Scholarships & Fellowships Office is an available resource for students applying for fellowships. Please feel free to contact Fellowship Advisor, Sylvia Wu, at ugfellow@hawaii.edu or (808) 956-8391.