Guidelines for requesting a strong letter of recommendation

You have put in many hours of thought and work into your application and those who write a letter of reference for you will provide additional information to help selection committees make informed decisions about the match and feasibility that you will complete a successful graduate program or fellowship.

To this end, a letter of recommendation should not just shine a light on your character but should reflect an evaluation of the fit between you and your goals with the program. Before asking someone to write you a letter, make sure that you are ready to supply a) information on the graduate program or fellowship, b) your resume / CV, c) your transcript and d) any required essays associated with the application. In most cases, you will be asked by the University or fellowship to waive your right to see the recommendation. It is in your best interest to check this box so that the institution knows that your reference had the freedom to write a confidential letter. Without checking this box, the institution cannot be certain that there wasn’t any coercion involved in writing the letter. Additionally, some professors will not write a letter unless that box is checked.

You need to approach this request with professionalism. In addition to all material noted above, provide your reference with clear instructions for completing / uploading the letter, give them one month to complete it and give them a reminder one week before it is due. Most on-line portals will tell you when someone has submitted a letter.

What makes for a strong letter?

An evaluator who is able to give specific, concrete and recent examples which would illuminate your match and character attributes such as leadership (identifies a problem, sees a solution, and leads others to bring about some kind of change), intellectual curiosity, flexibility, collaboration, dealing with stress and conflict, cultural sensitivity and interpersonal skills with examples is likely to write you a stronger letter. Merely being in a professor’s class for one quarter is likely to lead to a less than stellar letter just because he or she simply did not get to know you as well as a student who would be working on research with them or serve as a TA / LA for a year or more. Who is in the best position to evaluate your likelihood of success within a professional context? Asking older friends, neighbors or parents of friends are usually not good choices. Former bosses often have no experience writing letters to evaluate your fit with a graduate program or fellowship. A non-professional letter is indeed worse than not having one at all. Letters are commonly 1 ½ to 2 pages single spaced (up to 3 pages is fine).

Sometimes you may have had an extenuating circumstance that shows through in a gap in your transcript or lower grades for a period of time. If you have a professor who can comment on why those grades may not be a reflection of your future ability – that faculty could be an ally and a strong reference.

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How many letters are you asking any individual to write? It is very important that each of your letters be tied to your fit with each specific institution / fellowship. Be very clear up front on how many personalized letters you are expecting to ask a person to write. A “to whom it may concern” general letter will not further your application – especially for national / international fellowships.

When asking for a letter of recommendation, it is perfectly fine for you to let the person know who else is writing a letter for you and for you to tell them why you think they would be a good reference for you. Be very upfront with your reference about their willingness to write a strong letter for you. If they cannot guarantee that they will write a strong letter after providing them with your material, I encourage you to withdrawal the request.

Once a person has agreed to write a letter on your behalf you can send them to the CSFD website under Faculty Development / professional resources (http://blog.spu.edu/csfd/professional-resources/) for guidelines on how to write a strong letter of recommendation.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions about requesting letters of recommendation.

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