



Letters of Recommendation – Advice for Fellowship Applicants

Purpose of Letters –

You are making a claim in your application that you are an ideal fit for a specific fellowship because you have the right experience, motivations, character, and goals. Your letters of recommendation serve as witnesses to that claim. They provide detailed evidence of your experience, demonstrations of motivation, strength of your character, and likelihood of your success. Ask people to write for you that are able to speak to these aspects about you.

Whom to ask –

- Choose people who know you well in the context for which you are hoping they will speak.
- Choose people that have the experience and background suited to the area to which they will be speaking.
- Many people suggest getting only big names, full professors, or people in the highest rank of labs/organizations. If you can get those people to write for you and they know you well, that's great. If you are just asking them to write and all they can say is that you worked or studied with them, that's not ideal. For fellowship recommendations, the readers really are looking for a good understanding of you in context rather than status symbols. Choose recommenders accordingly.

Know the Fellowship

Make sure you look at the fellowship and get advised on what the funder is looking for. You can only convince your letter writers that you are a good fit for the opportunity if you are able to talk about the fellowship with confidence and point out how your experience, motivations, and goals align with what the funder's mission.

Requesting a Letter:

Do not let the automated application system email be the first time the potential letter writer hears about the request. Approach your potential letter writer early, in a professional and prepared way to ask them if they are willing to write you a strong letter for the opportunity. If you can, make the request in person. If you are not able to do that, you can do so by phone or by email (know your potential letter writer and honor their preferences). Your request should include the following elements:

- Reminder of your relationship and experience with the potential letter writer
- Your plans to apply – what fellowships (or other opportunities) and why those particular opportunities
- Why you thought this person would be good to have as a letter writer
- What materials you plan to provide for the writer (resume, statements, other materials)

- A link or attached guidelines for the opportunity (link to fellowship's page or a document with descriptions of multiple opportunities)
- Appreciation, recognition of time involved, and awareness that the potential letter writer might not be able to provide a recommendation

Following up

- Be sure to provide any materials you said you could provide in a timely fashion (and provide any other requested materials)
- You might provide the letter writer with the fellowship adviser's contact information in case they have any questions or want further guidance (we are more than happy to help)
- Let the letter writer know that there is an internal process (for nominated fellowships) and they will need to submit to the internal (CCL Apply Now) system first. If you are nominated, they will need to submit a second time (in most cases) to the foundation's online system
- If your recommender has not submitted within a week of the due date, you may send a friendly reminder and let them know how you are feeling about your application
- Keep in mind, people often do not submit until the day the letter is due, and that is their prerogative. If, for some reason, they have not submitted by the deadline (for the internal process at least) we can follow up with the individual for you

What if...

In the rare case that a potential writer says they will serve as a recommender if you write the letter and they will sign it, you need to advocate for yourself. Writing your own recommendation for someone to sign is unethical and does not serve your application. Readers can tell if a letter has been written by the applicant in most cases. Let the writer know that you don't feel comfortable writing the letter for them to sign. You can also offer to provide an outline of your experience and goals for the fellowship. If the potential writer insists on that approach, you should probably consider finding a different person to write for you.

Remember to thank your letter writers and to let them know if you received the award or if you didn't, but what you got out of the process of applying. Your recommenders would appreciate knowing that the time they spent served some value for you.