

Helping Your Recommenders Help You

Your goal is to help your recommenders write a letter that is effective and speaks specifically about why you are a good choice for the scholarship, fellowship, or graduate program for which you are applying. An all-purpose letter (“I strongly support X for anything or everything whatever it may be”) is less effective than one saying why you are an unusually good choice for a particular program or fellowship. Here are some suggestions for helping your recommenders to help you in their letters:

- 1) Give your recommenders information about both about yourself and the program or fellowship you are applying for. You can do this with a brief (usually one page) “cheat sheet.” If you are applying to a graduate school: describe the program and explain why it is of particular interest to you. If you are applying for a competitive fellowship: describe the characteristics of that fellowship (e.g., its mission and the personal qualities it is looking for in its recipients) and how you would to use the fellowship.
- 2) Provide some general background about yourself: your GPA, notable extracurricular activities; important honors or accomplishments. Emphasize the things that are particularly appropriate to what you are applying for. Either include this on your “cheat sheet” or provide a brief resume.
- 3) If your recommender is a professor whose classes you haven’t taken in a year or two or a supervisor whom you haven’t worked for in a while, bring that person up-to-date about what you’ve been doing.
- 4) Ask your recommenders if there is any other information they would like to have in order to help them as they write their letters.
- 5) Give your recommenders ample time to write their letters. Don’t leave them feeling rushed and up against a deadline.

And once everything is done, stay in touch with your recommenders. Let them know how the application turned out.

