

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Whom should you ask to do letters of recommendation? Ask yourself what things the selection committee would like to hear. Who can tell the committee those things about you?

- Choose your recommenders carefully. Typically you need 2-3 letters; sometimes, especially for fellowships, 4. Make sure that the people know you and can comment on your scientific and/or teaching potential. This is not the time to get a letter from your family minister.
- ASK if your recommenders are willing. Do not just assume that they will do this big job. They may want to have a chance to warn you that they are willing but the letter may be weak. That gives you a chance to find someone else.
- Allow plenty of time (three weeks or more)! This is a big job and your recommenders are probably writing letters for many people. Do you want them to hurry?
- Make sure that your recommenders know as much as possible about you. Do research with them if possible. Otherwise, go to their office many times over the years to discuss classwork, career goals, ..., whatever. Supply them with a copy of your personal essay and vita (or similar information). In fact, ask for their input concerning your essay. Supply them with any other information about you that they may not know but might be willing to include.
- Make sure your recommenders know what your career goals are and how this particular application will contribute to the accomplishment of those goals.
- Make sure your recommenders know what sort of application this is. Is this a generic graduate school application, some special program, a fellowship, a TA? Recommenders may stress different things for different kinds of applications. Distinguish between job applications and graduate school applications. Provide your recommenders with descriptions of any special programs.
- Most schools have an office (Career Planning and Placement?) that will archive confidential letters of recommendation and send them wherever you say for a fee. While you're at it, have your recommenders send a generic copy of their letters to this office. You may suddenly need to submit an application when your recommender is out of town, or worse, deceased.

To Spare Your Recommenders:

- Try to bundle your requests to recommenders so that they can deal with the requests efficiently. Many recommenders appreciate a hard copy list of institutions and deadlines.
- Some recommenders may be required to obtain a separate signed statement about confidentiality from you on a special form provided by their home institution (over and above any such statement on the application). Provide such signed forms together with your bundled requests.
- Your recommenders will write one letter on the computer and send it to everyone. Composing the letter is what takes time. You will be very lucky if they are willing to write two versions, one for jobs and one for graduate schools. Therefore, do not ask a zillion people to write a few letters each to try to spare them work.
- These days, most recommendations for graduate school are solicited online. You will provide information online about the recommender and then the automated system takes over. Make sure to fill out all the information requested, such as address and phone for the recommender.
- For recommendations that must be sent by slowmail: Some recommenders might like stamped addressed envelopes, but most are required to use official letterhead and cannot use your envelopes. Ask. Sticky address labels will be appreciated by most recommenders.
- Some schools try to insist that recommenders return their letters to you in a special sealed envelope. This is especially common for fellowships. Nevertheless, many recommenders refuse and usually this is ok. Discuss it in advance with the recommenders. One successful strategy is for you to complete the entire application packet, give it to the recommender. They add their own recommendation and mail it for you. Allow extra time before the deadline for this procedure.