Requesting Letters of Recommendation

Strong Letters Are Essential

1. Approach potential recommenders first as advisors. During your first three years of undergraduate study, set a goal of getting to know at least one professor each semester and let them get to know you; you may not be successful every semester, but you will build a group of professors who know and can speak to your academic interests and talents. Discuss your courses, your plan of study and your long-range interests and goals. Ask for their advice about potential projects, readings, recommended courses, and graduate programs. These conversations will allow you to consider which professors can write enthusiastic recommendations; these meetings will also give your recommenders the in-depth knowledge of you and your interests, which they need to write engaging letters of recommendation.

2. Generic "To Whom It May Concern" letters and open (you haven’t waived your right to read your recommendations) recommendations will negate your efforts to present a strong application. Make sure that you waive your right to read recommendations submitted on your behalf (under the Family Rights and Privacy Act); open recommendations are rarely considered seriously, and are usually generic “speak-say-hear-no-evil” statements that address neither your strengths nor your weaknesses.

During your undergraduate program, seek opportunities for professional and career contacts and opportunities beyond your Texas State curricular requirements. Undertake independent research projects that extend beyond your course work; apply for research grants such as those available from the Student Undergraduate Research Fund (SURF). Participation in the annual Undergraduate Research Conference (at the end of the fall semester) and the Honors Thesis Forum (at the end of the spring semester) presents your work to a larger audience than most class work; also seek opportunities to attend and present posters and papers at professional conferences. For many fellowship opportunities, a strong recommendation from a practicing professional can add substantial depth to your application. These recommendations can develop from summer employment, internships, study abroad, professional associations, and alumni contacts.

3. Make a list of the persons you will ask for recommendations; include at least two alternates should anyone on your first list not be able to write a recommendation. You must trust all of these potential recommenders to write strong, positive recommendations.

4. Ask for recommendations well in advance of the deadline; a month is minimum. Preferably, ask how much lead-time each recommender needs. Letters for major fellowships should be requested at the end of the spring semester so that they can be written during the summer; remember that faculty members are often away from campus over the summer month.

5. Ask for a recommendation in a private conversation. With a diplomatic question, such as: "Do you feel you know me (my academic record, my leadership qualities) well enough to write a strong letter of recommendation for the ______ fellowship?" give the recommender

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an opportunity to decline; don’t ask for a recommendation in a public setting, where the recommender might feel pressured to say “yes.” Only if you have an established relationship should your inquiry be made by e-mail. If the answer is "no" or ambiguous, don’t push. If the recommender gives you a positive answer, indicate that you appreciate their willingness to take the time to write a detailed and strong recommendation for this major competitive fellowship. Remember, that a “fill-in-the-blanks” generic letter can become an unseen liability to your application!

6. Schedule an appointment with each of your recommenders to discuss the scholarship, its selection criteria, and your recent and significant activities. During these conversations, suggest what you would like for each recommender to emphasize. Let each recommender know the names of your other recommenders so that they can write letters that complement rather than repeat one another. The Honors advisor, will ask cooperating Texas State faculty to coordinate their recommendation letters. *If your application requires a university endorsement, coordination through the Honors advisor is essential.*

Be ready to discuss: why you seek the recommendation; what strengths, qualifications, preparation, achievements, skills or goals make you a strong candidate for this opportunity and help distinguish you from other candidates; what points you would like the recommender to emphasize or address.

Caution: you may ethically provide supporting information, such as a list of points you would like the recommendation letter to address and a factual narrative biography or list of key achievements, but you should not draft your own recommendation. If a recommender asks you to provide a draft of your recommendation, diplomatically explain that you are unable to write a draft that represents the recommender’s point of view, including professional/academic judgment, insights, and comparative evaluations of your strengths and qualifications. Astute reviewers can pretty quickly discern the voice of the applicant in a "ghost-written" recommendation, which would result in a severely negative evaluation.

Before your appointments, forward the following documents and information to each recommender:

* A current resume that lists your studies, activities, and honors. Be sure to include internships, work/research experience, community service, conference papers/presentations, and other creative or leadership experiences.

* A copy of your personal statement, fellowship project proposal, and/or course of study proposal; also include other descriptive information from your application (career plans, foreign travel experience, or non-academic interests are sometimes requested). If you have not yet completed these application materials, provide an informal one- or two-page statement.

* A synopsis of relevant course work that will highlight what makes you a strong candidate; exemplary papers or exams are especially helpful.

* A current copy of your Texas State transcript, which can be downloaded from Catsweb. This will give your recommender an overview of your academic program, your grades, and your cumulative GPA. Be ready to explain any extenuating circumstances (family emergencies, health, course load, etc) where grades are low—generally for prestigious fellowships, anything below a B needs explanation.

* The official description of the criteria (academic, major/minor, professional, personal, etc.) the recommender’s letter should address and the deadline when the
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letter is due. Supplement this description with your own suggestions as to what you would like your recommender to emphasize.

* Any cover sheets or official recommendation forms that should accompany the letter. Be sure to complete any section that pertains to you: name, address to which the letter should be sent, etc. Each scholarship is different. Make sure you have waived your right to read your recommendations.

* If you are asking for more than one letter (as for multiple fellowships), provide the following information on a separate sheet, for each fellowship:

  • To whom each letter should be addressed (individual or committee, relevant titles, address).

  • How each letter should be submitted: whether submitted online, mailed to the fellowship organization, submitted through the Honors office, or submitted through another agency. If online submissions are required or suggested, outline the access procedures (including web addresses, passwords, etc.) that the recommender should follow; if mailing is required, provide stamped and addressed envelopes.

  • The deadline for submission. Remember that "postmarked" and "received by" can be substantially different dates.

8. Provide a list of your recommenders to the Honors Advisor well ahead of the due dates; the Advisor will ask cooperating Texas State faculty to coordinate their recommendation letters. As noted in item 6 above, your application and all recommendations must be coordinated through the Honors advisor if a university endorsement is required.

9. Write each of your recommenders a hand-written note of thanks. Keep them aware of what happens during the application review process; let them know even if you are not selected for an interview or for an award.

10. Keep in mind that many fellowships are privately funded and may be directed to particular applicant profiles (race, religion, interests, etc.) that might not include you; make sure you fit the preferred profile for a particular fellowship before taking the time to complete the application.

Throughout the application and review process, remind yourself that the major prestigious fellowships are extremely competitive and that rejections are far more likely than acceptances. Don’t think of a rejection as a negative comment on you and your application—your qualifications might not fit the particular criteria and the mix of candidates that the review committees seek as they compare the many qualified applications; at this level of competition, all serious applications are expected to be excellent, so that the review process is well beyond quantitative assessments.

For more information, contact:
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4/12/2012