


Strategizing Your Recommendation Letters

DivE In: October 14-16, 2022



Thinking about
recommendation
letters can be
scary. Let's break
them down.

Recommendation letters are a crucial part of applications.

- PhD applications typically ask for 3+ letters.
- Fellowships typically ask for 3-4 letters.
- Best case scenario: glowing, personal recommendation letters from 3+ famous research professors in your subfield.
- Worst case scenario: 3+ letters from people who secretly hate you.

We are all somewhere in the middle!



Reminder:
letters are
just one
component
of your app.

You can help your writers help you.

Ask

Ask for a letter **at least** a month before the deadline.

Remind

Send periodic **reminders** (one month, two weeks, three days, day of).

Prepare

Prepare a packet about yourself, the work you've done together, the programs you are applying to, and the deadlines.

- We will work on this today!

Make it easy for your letter writers

- Include
 - CV
 - (If you feel comfortable) personal and/or research statements
 - General description of the kinds of programs to which you're applying (e.g., human cognitive neuroscience, rotational programs, clinical, etc.)
- Tell them EXACTLY what you want emphasized in their letter (e.g., writing quality, technical knowledge/experience, project management, etc.)
 - This is particularly important if two or more of your letter writers come from the same organization/lab

Don't be afraid to ask for multiple letters.



People know what they can handle and will say no if they can't do it.



Professors are used to writing plenty of letters for plenty of people.



**Let's plan our
recommendation
letters together.**

1) List everyone you have ever worked with.

- This list can include:
 - Professors
 - Research advisors
 - Employers
 - Club advisors
 - Postdocs and PhD students
 - Internship supervisors
 - TA supervisors
- Don't worry about what or how much you've done.
- Just start writing people's names.

2) List the qualities about yourself you want to emphasize.

- For example:
 - Research expertise
 - Teaching excellence
 - Technical knowledge
 - Leadership
 - Compassion
 - Dedication
 - Motivation
 - Past projects
 - Personal background
 - Quick learning
- Bonus: you can include these qualities in your personal statement too.

3) Circle all the people from (1) that can talk about (2).

- No limits: circle as many as you want, but try to aim for at least 3.
- Definitely include anyone who has supervised you for research.

4) Deep dive into each person from (3).

- For each person, list how you met and what you worked on together.
- Be sure to include details relating to (2)--but not every person needs to cover every detail.
- To be even more helpful, include dates! (e.g., “worked in the lab in Summer 2019”)

5) Ask for strong recommendation letters!

- If you haven't spoken to your potential writer for a while, you can ask for a 30-min chat to catch up before asking.
- You can also email your potential writer.
 - Be sure to include your CV/resume, any important updates, and deadlines.

"Can you write me a strong recommendation letter?"

6) You don't need to pack everything into one email

- One strategy is to first send a brief email requesting the letter
- Then, after they have agreed to write the letter, send them the program details, deadlines, statements, etc.

Example first email to a reference writer you know well

Dear XXXXXXXX

I'm reaching out because I'm planning to apply to PhD programs in <FIELD OF STUDY> and I would like to know if you could write a strong reference letter supporting my applications? I'm considering <#> programs right now. If you are able to provide these references, I can send you all the program details, deadlines, and my CV.

Kind thanks,
<NAME>

Example first email to a reference writer who is a course professor/TA

Dear XXXXXXXX

My name is XXXXXXXXX. I was a student in your XXXXXX class at <SCHOOL> in <SEMESTER YEAR>. <SENTENCE TO HELP THEM REMEMBER YOU>. I'm reaching out because I'm planning to apply to PhD programs in <FIELD OF STUDY> and I would like to know if you could write a strong reference letter supporting my applications? I'm considering <#> programs right now. If you are able to provide these references, I can send you all the program details, deadlines, and my CV. I'm happy to also chat over the phone or Zoom to tell you more about my plans.

Best,
<NAME>



Questions?