

Requesting Letters of Recommendation

Recommendations are an important part of any scholarship application. Take careful note of how many and what sorts of letters are required for your scholarship. How many of the letters must, or should, focus on academics? Is it desirable or required to have letters that document service or leadership activities, research, or work experiences?

Academic Recommendations

Academic recommenders (in most cases, professors) provide important information about your intellectual abilities. Depending on the context in which the recommender knows you, she may comment on your strengths as a scholar, writer, problem-solver, speaker, artist, or researcher. Your professor may describe contributions you have made to class discussions or group projects, how you interact with other students, and the sorts of questions you ask in class or in office hours, thereby offering insights into your character, interests, and ideas. A recommender who has supervised your research can comment on the nature of the research, your contribution to it, and the skills you demonstrated. Faculty recommenders, particularly from your field of study, can comment on your preparation for graduate study and the suitability of the program you intend to pursue with the support of the scholarship.

Students sometimes ask, "do the academic recommenders have to be professors?" For a national or international scholarship application, letters from professors are usually very important. In some cases, it might be appropriate to solicit an academic recommendation from a non-faculty employee such as a lecturer, teaching specialist, or academic advisor, but only if this person is in a unique position to comment on your abilities or experiences, and only if your application also includes strong letters from members of the faculty. Most scholarship competitions are concerned with how well your faculty recommenders know you and what they say about you.

Non-Academic Recommendations

When choosing non-academic recommenders, keep in mind that scholarship selection committees want to hear about particularly significant, recent experiences. A letter from the director of a non-profit organization for which you volunteer, a minister or rabbi who can comment first-hand on your ongoing contribution to your religious community, your college athletic coach, or the advisor to your student organization

can help to round out the portrait of you as a whole person. A personal character reference from a family friend is never acceptable, nor is a reference from a high school teacher or boy scout leader, unless that person can comment on an important activity that you have continued during college. A letter from a work supervisor may be appropriate if your supervisor can comment on skills and experiences that are relevant to your long-term plans and to your scholarship proposal. Whom you ask will depend on the scholarship you're applying for and the sorts of things you want to emphasize in your application.

Making Your Request

Be courteous, but don't be shy about asking for recommendations. Professors, in particular, write them often and consider it part of their jobs to do so for excellent students. Some ways to word your request might be: "do you feel that you know me well enough to write a scholarship recommendation for me?" or "I'm planning to apply for a scholarship; would you be willing to write a recommendation?" or "I'm applying for a scholarship and believe they will be interested in the work I've been doing in your lab. Would you have time to write a recommendation for me?"

Contact your prospective recommenders well in advance of the deadline. Whenever possible, we recommend that you meet with them in person rather than relying on email or phone. If you visit your professor during office hours or in an appointment, you are creating an opportunity for her to get to know you better and to ask some questions, which will help her to shape the letter of recommendation. Moreover, seeing you in person will jog your professor's memory of previous interactions with you.

Provide your recommender with some information to make their job easier. If you can, bring along a paper or exam you wrote for their course, preferably the copy that was returned to you with comments. Bring a brief description of the scholarship and a recommendation form if there is one. If you are requesting an academic reference, bring a copy of your transcript so your recommender can comment broadly on the academic choices you have made and your performance. If you have already written a rough draft of your personal statement, bring that as well. A simple scholarship resume may also be useful, but it is generally not advisable to bring a detailed resume or portfolio—doing so may give your recommenders the erroneous impression that they should include all sorts of information about which they have no direct knowledge. You should not risk offending your prospective recommender by offering language or "talking points" that you hope they will include. However, it is appropriate

to let her know why you are asking her for the recommendation—for example, because you are particularly proud of a research paper you wrote for her course, or because she is familiar with an activity that you are going to emphasize in your application.

Of course, it is possible that the professor will decline, perhaps because he doesn't know you well enough, or because your academic performance in his class was not strong enough, for him to write a really compelling letter. A professor may also decline to write if you haven't allowed adequate time. In some cases, someone who declines to write a recommendation can help you identify others who would be more appropriate recommenders.

Your recommenders are welcome to refer to our Advice for Recommenders page, or to contact the national scholarship advisor, if they have questions about what is expected.

As the deadline approaches, send your recommenders a courteous reminder, and afterward, send a brief thank-you note. Keep your recommenders informed as the competition proceeds.

Confidentiality

As a general rule, you should not expect to read your letters of recommendation. Letters to which you have not had access carry more weight with selection committees. Most scholarships require that letters be sent directly to the selection committee or campus representative, or that they be given to you in sealed envelopes with the recommenders' signature across the seal. If you are asked in the application to sign a waiver of your right to read the letters, we recommend that you sign. Of course, if a recommender offers to give you a copy to read, you may accept it.

Source: adapted from honors.umn.edu/scholarships/advising-resources