

JULIAN OLDEN (UW)

ADVICE FOR GETTING A GREAT REFERENCE LETTER

Who should you ask?

- The letter of recommendation MUST provide a comprehensive and positive evaluation of your abilities and aptitude as it relates to the NSF GRFP.
- It should not be surprising that letters from professors are highly valued by admissions committees. However, the best letters are written by people who know you, from whom you have taken multiple classes and/or have completed substantial projects and/or have received very positive evaluations.
- Create a balanced portfolio of writers. Consider all of the people who you might approach and attempt to compose a balanced panel of reviewers.
- This is not the time to settle, choose the easiest path, or be impulsive. Take the time and make the effort to consider all of the possibilities.
- Take the approach of asking different people to write about the different aspects of your work.
- An effective recommendation letter is written by someone who meets some of the following criteria:
 - Is aware of your field of interest and the program/fellowship you are applying for
 - Is able to evaluate your performance and personal characteristics
 - Is able to discuss your capacity to work with others and your leadership skills
 - Can evaluate your level of professionalism (e.g., punctuality, efficiency, assertiveness)
 - Can discuss your academic skills -- not simply experience, but evaluate your potential to succeed in the future
 - Has some recognition and whose judgment is highly valued within the field
 - Is able to write a good reference letter (i.e., is literate)

Approaching your letter writer

- Don't spring it on the writer; be thoughtful in your request and be appreciate of their time. Give the writer enough time to craft a good letter. Writing a letter of recommendation isn't easy. Ask at least 3-4 weeks before the due date. Earlier is better.
 - Offer to arrange an appointment (phone or in person) to more fully explain your proposal and plan to apply for the fellowship.
 - Don't ask, "could you write a letter?" Instead ask, "Do you feel that you are able to write a helpful letter supporting my application for the NSF GRFP?" Ask whether the writer feels that he or she can craft a "helpful letter." You don't need any old letter – you need a good letter!
 - Remember to tell the writer the application due date, but don't rush them. Don't make the writer rush as it will result in an average or even mediocre letter. NSF is looking for stellar letters not average ones. Send one follow-up a week before the deadline and then again two days if you don't hear back.
 - If the writer offers to review your admissions essay, take him or her up on it – and use their advice to improve your essay.

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- Pay attention to signals that writer does not want to write a letter on your behalf. Anything other than a glowing letter can harm your application. Take no for an answer. If a writer declines to write you a letter, don't push. He or she is doing you a favor!

After the letter writer agrees

- The best thing that you can do to ensure that your recommendation letters cover all the bases is to provide your writer with all the necessary information. Don't assume that they will remember anything about you. (I know, you're quite memorable!)
- Give the writer what he or she needs to write an informed letter. Don't forget to include relevant links and emails for online applications. However, also include a short summary of the GRFP in your email.
- Don't just supply your letter writers with a copy of your CV. Also provide one or two pages, perhaps with the main points in bulleted form, about things not in your CV that you wish to have expanded in the recommendation letters. Remind them of the particular way you approached and solved a problem, the initiatives you took with colleagues, and the feedback you received on your teaching evaluations.
- Remember, your CV tells what you did. Your letters of recommendation tell how well you did it.
- Don't provide your documents to the writer in a piecemeal fashion. Be organized and respectful of their time (and inbox!)
- Follow up. Writers are busy. Check in periodically to see if the recommendation has been sent or if they need anything else from you. Follow up to ensure that your letter is sent, but don't make a pest out of yourself.
- Thank your writers. Believe it or not, very few students take the time to thank their recommenders. Take a few minutes out of your day to handwrite a thank you note to each of your writers. Why? Writing a good letter takes time and energy. He or she is not required to write a letter on your behalf and instead is going out of the way to help you. Reciprocate by sending a thank you note that expresses your appreciation.
- Report back to your referees. Tell them about the status of your application and definitely tell them once you receive notification from NSF. They want to know!

What do NSF reviewers look for in a recommendation letter?

Beneficial

- Specific information about the applicant—information that reviewers can use to determine the applicant's strengths.
- Some context of how the writer knows the applicant—class, research, work, or other context—and for what period of time the writer has known the applicant.
- Evidence that the writer knows the applicant personally. For example, events or actions that are unique to this relationship are more credible than information that could be gathered from the CV.
- Specific examples of what the applicant has done. For example, if the student wrote a brilliant paper, the letter mentions its topic and why it stood out. If the student did outstanding work in another regard, the letter explains the nature of this work and its particular strengths, especially as they relate to the goals of the GRFP.

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- Rationale why the applicant would be a strong candidate for the fellowship. How does this candidate exemplify the personal qualities or selection criteria specified by NSF? Specific examples are crucial.
- Qualifications of the student for the project the applicant is proposing. Such letters provide the links between past performance and what is proposed.
- Placing the student in a larger context. For example, a letter could compare the present applicant to others who have applied for similar honors in the past or who have succeeded in such competitions. If possible, the student can be compared to graduate students or professionals.
- Remarks of colleagues for supporting evidence or the acknowledgement of specific strengths. Letters from professors may also draw on the comments from teaching assistants who may have worked more closely with the applicants.

Detrimental

- Letters that are too short and/or fail to provide specific examples or instances of points mentioned.
- Generic letters or letters for another purpose sent without regard to the specifics of the GRFP.
- Letters merely summarizing information available elsewhere in the application or only presenting the student's grade or rank in a class.
- Letters focusing too much on the context of how the writer knows the applicant (descriptions of the course or its approaches) and not sufficiently on the student and his or her accomplishments.
- Letters consisting largely of unsupported praise. Kind words that do not give committees a strong sense of how applicants have distinguished themselves are not helpful.
- Letters focusing on experiences that happened quite a few years ago. Even letters from writers with long-standing relationships with the applicant need to be as current and forward-looking as possible.
- Letters that may be read as implying criticism or whose criticisms might be taken to indicate stronger reservations than stated. Letters should be honest—and honest criticism, if generously presented, can enhance the force of a letter—but committees take critical comments very seriously.