

All About Letters of Recommendation

You'll need a minimum of three letters of recommendation for PhD programs and four letters for fellowships. Some applications (*cough* Stanford *cough*) give you room for up to *six* letters. I'll go over who you should consider asking for recommendations, when you should ask, and how you can prepare packets of important information that will make everyone's lives much easier.

Who to Ask

This [guide](#) to applying to PhD programs in computer science was very helpful when I was applying and has a great section on recommendation letters. Here is a summary of the important parts.

- Content matters.
 - The PhD is a research degree, so you will want someone who can attest to your skills in research. Research advisors are a great source. If you worked directly with a grad student, you can ask the PI to co-write the recommendation letter.
 - Someone who knows you well will be able to write a higher quality than someone who doesn't. Avoid asking a professor whose class you took just because you got an A. If you have a relationship with that professor beyond just getting a good grade, then feel free to add them to the list. Also consider work supervisors, professors you TAed for, and academic advisors.
- Position matters.
 - Recommendation letters will have the greatest weight when they come from people who have gone through the process and can compare you to others in a similar position. Therefore, research professors have the greatest weight.
 - Next come research scientists, lecturers, systems scientists,

- employers, and postdocs.
- Bonus points for professors who are well-known in their field. Professors reading applications are more likely to trust recommendation letters from people they know.
- Overview of my references, just in case it helps you.
 1. Research and undergraduate thesis advisor. Well-known in NLP.
 2. Professor I TAed for. Well-known in NLP.
 3. Research advisor (for one summer). Specializes in databases and data science.
 4. Dean of student life/ academic advisor (supplementary)
 5. Google intern host from summer before senior year (supplementary)
 6. Instructor I TAed for from summer before junior year (supplementary)
 - I put a lot of thought into asking this person to write for me. He was a major source of my motivation to teach, and I mentioned him in my personal statement. I also wanted to show that I am committed to both research and education.

When to Ask

You should give your recommenders at least to write your letters, but I suggest asking in late August/early September just to be safe. You should also send brief and friendly reminders one month, one week, three days (optional), and one day before the deadline.

How to Prepare

People have a lot going on and may not always remember all the details, so you'll want to prepare a packet of important information to refresh their memories. On top of that, you can use these packets to ask your recommenders to highlight certain pieces of information. Some professors might prefer a paper copy, but I emailed all the files to my recommenders. Here is what should go in the packet.

Note: my advice here differs from what is stated in the guide I linked above. These are materials that I provided to my recommenders. The important part is that you provide important information in a concise, easily located way.

- Summary sheet (1-2 pages)
 - YOUR NAME
 - Summary of key accomplishments that are relevant to that recommender
 - Programs and fellowships you need recommendation letters for, their deadlines, and instructions for submitting (most likely an online portal)
- CV/resume
 - You can include either. I chose to include my CV because I was already providing a shortened summary as well.
- Personal statement (optional)
 - One of my recommenders asked for my personal statement so I sent a draft. I didn't send it to the rest simply because it wasn't finished.

Don't forget a thank you note!

When application season is over, you have your results, and you have made your decision, don't forget to send a thank you message to each of your recommendation letter writers. Writing letters is hard work and I'm sure they would be curious about what you end up doing!