

Develop Quality Recommendation Letters

Think of the people who write your recommendation letters as your star witnesses—very much like the ones in a courtroom trial. They are the folks who corroborate your story, testify on behalf of your character, and offer supporting evidence as to why you are worthy of each scholarship award.

Obtaining letters from these character witnesses can be either an extremely satisfying or a totally frustrating experience. It's a positive experience when recommenders say such glowing things about you that the words just seem to radiate off the page. But when you're handed recommendations that don't exactly put you in a good light or weren't crafted with much care, you can wind up in a dark mood indeed.

The crux of the problem is this: Letters of recommendation are the one element of your application that you don't fully control. You are dependent on others—people who may or may not have the time, energy, or skills to craft the support letters you need.

And make no mistake about it, the quality of your letters of recommendation can make or break your chances of winning. They carry such weight because they help verify the information you've provided about yourself. It's not that judges don't trust what you say. They just want more evidence that you are really as wonderful as you say you are.



ATTENTION STUDENTS AND PARENTS: This article is designed to work together with Ben Kaplan's *Scholarship Starter Kit* CD. If you haven't received a CD, contact your college planner or counselor, or let us know at www.ScholarshipCoach.com/needkit

Put Together a Solid List

The first action step along the path to a great recommendation letter is to develop a quality list of people who potentially could write you such letters. On this list, record how well each person knows you, in what context he or she knows you, and the aspects of your life each letter writer could likely highlight.

Teachers, professors, school administrators, counselors, employers, coaches, activity advisers, as well as ministers, rabbis, and priests, are good recommendation prospects to include on this list.

But don't limit yourself to traditional sources either. If you're planning to pursue a particular career or field of study, think of ways to get recommendations from people who work in this field (such as your family doctor, if you hope to pursue a medical career).

Be creative in your list of potential recommendation writers in other ways: One scholarship winner I interviewed, who tutored a fifth-grade student as part of a community service project, actually managed to get a letter of recommendation from the fifth grader himself—written in pencil!

For the time being, don't worry too much about whether a person will provide you with a strong recommendation. Try to put as many people on the list as you can.

Seek Quantity, Too

For a variety of reasons, a particular recommendation letter may not be as strong as you had expected. The recommendation writer could have been juggling other projects and may not have devoted the time it takes to craft a quality letter. In other instances, an individual who thinks very highly of you may not possess the writing skills to effectively communicate this sentiment on paper.

Because of these factors, seek to obtain as many letters of recommendation as possible. Procuring more than enough recommendations provides insurance against those that are less glowing than anticipated. And because most scholarship applications want you to include recommendation letters with your other application materials (as opposed to many college applications that require them to be sealed by the writer), you will be able to read the letters and evaluate their strengths before sending them off.

In this way, getting plenty of letters provides you with a virtual menu of recommendation entrees to choose from. People who know you in different contexts will have different perspectives, and the more perspectives you can accumulate, the better. Having this menu also provides you with the ability to choose the most appropriate recommendation letter when custom-tailoring each scholarship application. You will be able to select recommendations that best address a particular scholarship's judging criteria, best complement the other materials you've prepared for the application, and best reinforce your major application themes.

Cultivate Relationships

You will be able to request a recommendation letter right away from people who know you well in multiple contexts. For potential recommendation writers who don't know you as intimately, you will want to get to know them better before you ask them for a letter.

I call this process *cultivating* a recommendation, and it's important for several reasons: First, there's a big difference between a *passable* recommendation and a great one. Because of this, cultivating a great recommendation is well worth the wait.

Second, once someone has written you a recommendation, it's more difficult to get him or her to update it. So you don't want to have someone write it too soon—before he or she has a chance to learn all the wonderful things about you. Of course, if you need a recommendation for an application right away, you won't have time to cultivate a new relationship with a potential letter writer.

Cultivating a recommendation isn't about putting on a show so someone will write nice things about you. It's about giving someone a real opportunity to learn more about you.

But if you work steadily at developing a menu of recommendation letters, your scholarship fate won't hang on the quality of a letter that is less complimentary than you would like.

The process of letter cultivation is especially important if you aren't able to list bunches of people who you're certain would write you strong recommendations. By following some simple guidelines, however, you will be able to transform nonexistent recommendation letters into solid ones and mediocre recommendations into glowing testaments to your ability.

So how does one cultivate a great recommendation letter? You do it by getting to know a potential recommender in a more in-depth context. If you're seeking a letter from a particular teacher or professor, you might, for instance, participate in the extracurricular activities or school committees he or she advises or oversees.

Alternately, you could serve as a teaching assistant (which usually means helping grade papers) or lab aide for the teacher or professor.

Perhaps it's as simple as regularly asking questions and meeting after class or during office hours. There are countless possibilities.

For others in your school—including principals, counselors, department heads, headmasters, or deans—make a point of getting to know them. Regularly ask for advice

and sign up for appointments. These individuals are powerful allies to have in your scholarship quest.

For recommenders outside the school environment, the process is much the same. If you hope to get a recommendation letter from the coordinator of a community service program you volunteer for, perhaps you want to first take on added responsibilities for the program. If you plan to get a recommendation from an employer, go the extra mile to make sure that you perform your job above and beyond what is expected.

Cultivating a recommendation isn't about putting on a show so someone will write nice things about you. It's about giving someone a real opportunity to learn more about you—thus gaining a better understanding of your personality, talents, skills, and character.

Do Your Prep Work

For a moment, let's actually pretend that you are a trial lawyer in the middle of a big case, and your recommendation writers are, in fact, your star expert witnesses. With everything riding on their testimony, do you think it would be wise to prep them before having them take the stand? You don't have to be Perry Mason to know that it's critical for these key witnesses to be as well-prepared as possible.

So don't let your letter of recom-

mendation writers “testify” to your character and deeds without prepping them first. No, you can’t give them a script of exactly what to say. But you can remind them of some key personal credentials and anecdotes, and suggest what areas of your record would be best to emphasize in light of your chosen scholarship’s judging criteria.

Think of this process as providing your recommendation writers with driving directions: You can explain to your writers generally how to get there, but you can’t tell them how fast to go, where to take rest stops, or what radio station to listen to along the way.

Note, however, that it is essential to communicate this in writing. Telling your recommenders verbally doesn’t do the job because they won’t have any materials to refer to when they are actually writing the letter.


And be sure to keep your written materials concise. It is better to focus your recommenders on the most important material rather than overwhelm them with pages and pages of information. Any more than, say, three or four pages of material, and the recommender might opt not to read it thoroughly.

All my own recommendation writers were very appreciative when I provided such information because the material helped jog their memories of what I had done, brought them up to speed on my latest credentials and accomplishments, and made the process of writing a personalized recommendation so much easier.

There is another benefit to this approach: When you put great care into your written materials, your recommendation writers will know

ASK THE COACH

What are the characteristics of a truly outstanding letter of recommendation?



Too many students include in scholarship applications recommendations from individuals who don’t know them well enough to comment in depth on their personal qualities. When a letter of recommendation is basically nothing more than a form letter, judges can see right through it. Statements like “Bob is a valued member of the class” or “Mary shows great promise”—without any specifics to back up these statements—come across as empty, shallow phrases.

Great recommendation letters, on the other hand, are so specific, detailed, and personal that they could be meant only for you. Often they include revealing stories or anecdotes that illustrate how you’ve exhibited certain positive qualities. References to specific incidents and occasions make your recommendations seem more genuine and memorable.

Some scholarship applicants make the mistake of going out of their way to include recommendations from famous or well-known people. One scholarship applicant I know, for instance, pulled some strings to get a recommendation letter from the governor of his state! The letter he received, however, lacked specifics (as the governor hadn’t spent much time with him) and was filled with political statements.

Don’t fall into the trap of submitting impersonal recommendation letters. They won’t help your cause. Your best bet for strong recommendation letters is people who know you well. The content of the letter itself is far more important than whose signature appears on the last line.

that when it comes to winning scholarships, *you mean business!* They will likewise put great care into their recommendation letters, too.

Minimize the Workload

When you are applying for a large number of scholarship awards, it can create a lot of extra work for your recommendation writers.

Let’s say, for instance, that throughout the year you will be using a particular recommenda-

tion letter in about 10 to 15 different applications. This means that you’re going to need to get 10 to 15 copies printed, with slight modifications made to each version to meet the specific requirements of each scholarship. If specific references are made to the scholarship’s name in the header or body of the letter, you’ll need to get those changed, too. And all this has to get done in time to meet each scholarship’s deadline.

As you can see, all these tasks

would involve a lot of repetitive work for your recommendation writers.

To minimize work for them, suggest to your recommendation writers that they give you an electronic copy of their letter on disk (and provide you with some letterhead or stationery, if they use it). Then you can be the one to print out each copy and make sure that references to the scholarship's name are correct.

Once you've done this, you'll be able to hand the recommendation writer a printout of the customized letter, ready for a final look-over and signature. Doing this not only helps out your recommendation writers, but also serves the added function of giving you the control to make sure

that new copies of letters are done properly and completed on time.

Try to anticipate in advance which applications are suitable for the reuse of a particular recommendation letter. This way, you can include briefings on several upcoming scholarships in the written materials you provide, and have the recommendation writer include additional information that may not be needed for immediate applications, but that will be necessary for later ones.

Keep in mind that mounting a major scholarship campaign means that you will need the help of your recommendation writers over and over again. The best way to garner

this help is to be courteous and appreciative. Try to plan ahead and give your recommenders at least two to three weeks' notice before you need the letters.

And just as your mother always told you, be sure to make a habit of writing thank-you notes. Writing recommendation letters isn't part of anyone's job description, and people are doing so out of the kindness of their hearts, their belief in your potential, and their desire to help.

The author of this article, Ben Kaplan, is the publisher of ScholarshipCoach.com and the winner of more than two dozen scholarships worth \$90,000—enough to cover virtually the entire cost of his Harvard education.



For more scholarships that feature recommendation letters, see Ben Kaplan's Scholarships That Totally Rock CD-ROM series. This series includes guides for medicine, law, business, and more. www.ScholarshipCoach.com/products/totallyrock

Recommendation Writer Brainstorm Worksheet

Page: _____

Recommendation Writer Name	Relationship to You	Aspects of Record They Can Highlight

Recommendation Letter Request Form

This form is designed to assist recommendation writers by providing background information about the student and the scholarship program to which he or she is applying.

Recommendation Writer: _____

Name of Student: _____

Student Contact Info: _____

Letter Draft Request Date: _____

Final Letter Deadline: _____

PART I: SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM INFORMATION

Scholarship Name: _____

To Whom to Address Letter: _____

Scholarship Judging Criteria: _____

Scholarship Application Instructions for Recommendation Writers:

PART II: STUDENT BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Three aspects of my background and record that may be of interest to scholarship judges include:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Three character qualities and personal traits that I'm trying to show scholarship judges include:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

In my own written application materials, I'm trying to communicate the following three main ideas:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

I have attached the following material(s) to this worksheet as additional background information:

[illegible]