

So you want a recommendation letter?

1. Recommendation letters are very important

Start with this thought in mind: **no matter what you are applying for these days, your recommendation letters are quite possibly the most important part of your application.** And why is that?

- No matter how great your grades are and how hard you worked and what a wonderful person you are, the same is also true of at least 30% or more of the people who are also applying for admission, the scholarship or fellowship, the TA-ship, the job... At a certain stage of the process, all the applicants look great to selection committee members and little differences become crucial.
- The people who are reviewing your application have no way of distinguishing you from the rest of the qualified, brilliant, and wonderful people who write great letters, personal statements, and proposals. They must rely on the impressions and experiences of people who know you and have supervised your studies and/or your work.
- Good recommendations by the right people can make all the difference. If the opportunity is important to you, it is worth working hard to get a good recommendation.

2. Whom should I ask for a recommendation?

- **Rule 1:** the best recommender is the person who knows you the best and comes closest to meeting the criteria mentioned in the rest of the following rules. A recommendation from the world's greatest expert in your field means very little (nothing, actually) if the letter shows that the person doesn't really know you and your work. *[But what if most of your contacts in the class were with a teaching assistant? You can still ask the professor but it would be prudent to ask the assistant to send a note to the professor saying something like "I hear that Miss Fulani in my section will be applying for the Botz Fellowship and will be asking you for a recommendation. I thought I would pass on the following impressions of her and her work in case it would be helpful in preparing your letter."]*
- **Rule 2:** you should start from the first day of your studies or job making sure that at least three supervisors/professors know you and your work well enough to write a good letter. If you haven't done this and it is too late, pay close attention to section 3 (and do better from now on).
- **Rule 3:** ask around, check out your recommenders, find out if people have doubts about the letters they write, try to discover how the people who worked with them did on the job/fellowship/admissions market. An unexpected bad recommendation (which might just be the result of a recommender's single-handed and misguided attempt to bring clear-headed honesty to the recommendation process) can kill a person's prospects and the victim will have

no idea why this happened. Beware potential recommenders who show signs of going off on personal crusades and those whose good students or employees don't do well on the job market. Most academics (but by no means all) see it as their job to help their best students go on to successful careers. If you have doubts about how well the person you are asking knows you or what they might say about you, give them an out when you ask for a letter [something like "...if you feel you do not know me well enough to write a recommendation, please let me know. I will appreciate it..."].

3. What can I do to get the best possible recommendation?

- a. **Don't wait until the last moment to ask.** A happy recommender who thinks of you as a thoughtful, careful person will do the best job of writing for you. If you wait until a week or less before the deadline to ask, you put a lot of pressure on someone who may be writing a lot of recommendations at the time, or too busy, or out of the country and you may lack the recommendation you need. [The best recommendation-writers are asked for many recommendations and get grumpy when they pile up at the last minute.]
- b. **Describe clearly what you are applying for and provide any information that you are sending with the application** [e.g. cover letter, description of your project, statement of purpose, etc.]. The best recommendations describe how you fit the goals of the search and the more your recommender knows about those goals the better the recommendation will be. Also give all the information that the recommender will need to submit the recommendation: addresses, procedures, etc.
- c. **Help your recommender write the recommendation.** Your recommender has probably had many students or employees and, although he or she might remember you, the details might be foggy. So help with details will make the recommender happy and the letter better. This is a very important part of assuring the very best recommendation. So, when you send the recommender a request for a recommendation, be sure to include the following information (in addition to the information in b. above). Most recommendations are required to refer to these things and time spent looking them up is time taken from thoughtful composition of your recommendation:
 - i. How does the recommender know you, under what circumstances?
 - ii. When did you start working with her or him and for how long?
 - iii. What classes, projects, or jobs did you do with the recommender?
 - iv. What things about you and your work do you think that the recommender can say. [This is a delicate part of your request but it can be done in a neutral manner and is very useful. See the sample note below.]
 - v. Do this even if the recommender has written for you before. Every application demands a slightly different recommendation.

4. A sample request for a recommendation

[From an imaginary former student but, with modifications depending on the purpose of the recommendation and the closeness of relations with the recommender, generally appropriate for any request.]

Dear Professor Fulani,

My name is Sean Talib and I was a student in your program from 2002-2004. I took several classes from you: PDQ 135 (The History of Pencils), PDQ 472 [Advanced Astrology], and the Undergraduate Seminar on Social Change, PDQ 497. In 2003-2004, I also served as your undergraduate assistant in PDQ 101 Introduction to Cultural Diversity.

Since working with you I have been admitted to the graduate program in Cultural Change and Diversity at the University of Northern Manitoba and am now applying for the Manfred B. Botz Fellowship, which was established to support a promising student studying change in material culture. I would very much appreciate it if you could serve as one of my recommenders. I have attached a description of the fellowship requirements, my personal statement, and the recommendation form supplied by the program.

I believe that you can speak to my class work (for which you awarded me 4.0 in each case), to my seminar paper ["From Pencils to Computers in the Elementary School Classroom"], which you said was as good an undergraduate paper as you had ever seen, and to my work with you as an undergraduate assistant.

The recommendations are due in two months (November 15, 2011) and must be sent to the following address;

Botz Fellowship Committee
University of Northern Manitoba
Box 1387
Sled Dog, Manitoba N134O12

Please let me know if you feel that you can write a positive recommendation for me. If you can, should I remind you of this request at a later date closer to the deadline?

Gratefully,

Sean Talib

5. Some exemplary excerpts from actual requests

I would like to request a recommendation letter from you for my application to the engineering departments this quarter.

I have been taking pre-engineering classes since the past two years and I am currently applying to HCDE (Human Centered Design and Engineering) department. HCDE teaches web programming languages like HTML, CSS which I have been using for tagging notes in the xxxx project. HCDE also teaches other web-programs, technical writing and usability courses.

Eventually I want to become a usability engineer ie collaborating with computer scientists and designing interfaces/products that users(consumers) find easy to use.

I'm currently also pursuing a minor in Near East and I have taken the following classes in the Near East department: NEARE 212 (grade~3.6), RELIG 430 (3.9), ARAB 411(4.0), currently taking NEARE 211 and continuing with Arabic. (I hope to do a graduate program in Near East in future so that is why I doing a minor in it now).

I think you could write a letter describing how the research I do for the xxxx project involves using my skills and interests in both HCDE and Near East (since I use a web programming language to tag both English and Arabic notes). That is the reason I love working on this project, I get to use both my minor and intended major in it.

My contribution to the xxxx project till now has been:

1. Converting all the actual diary images to web-accessible image formats.
2. Documenting all the drawings and symbols that exist in the diary.
3. Using HTML to tag pages, lines, glossary words, images in the English as well as the Arabic notes.
4. Will be contributing to the Undergraduate Research Symposium for the xxxx Project.

In this internship position, I would work at AUC in one of several top-level administrative offices, writing and editing publications with my native English skills, coordinating assorted projects, etc, working on a team of Egyptians and Americans in an academic setting. The application asks for ranked preferences and the Desert Development Center (investigating sustainable social and environmental development options in the desert lands of Egypt), the Office of the President, and the Office of the Provost are most appealing to me. The exceptional opportunities provided by this internship include making connections in the Cairene community, gaining work experience facilitating projects in an academic institution, and a year of learning Egyptian Arabic through immersion and free classes at the university.

The application for this Presidential Internship program asks that the recommendation writers describe "The student's general qualifications, Middle East experience or interest and ability to serve in the specific internships." I thought that you would be a good person to ask for this recommendation because you are somewhat familiar with my interest and background in the Middle East, and I believe that the experience I had assisting you would translate well to an intern position in a university's administrative office.

AND NEVER FORGET THE FOLLOW UP LETTER!

I wanted to thank you again for writing the recommendation letter for me. I had applied to three engineering departments. Luckily, I had gotten more than one offer and after due consideration I decided to pursue Electrical Engineering.

Thanks again for all your help and support, I truly appreciate it. It is really hard to find professors who help out so much.

Walter G. Andrews: University of Washington, 2010