



# Letters of Recommendation

## **A University of Oregon guide:**

### **Receiving the best letters of recommendation**

**Introduction:** This guide will help ensure that you will receive the best and strongest letters of recommendation possible.

Generally, you will be asked to provide 1-8 letters of recommendation when you apply for grants, fellowships, scholarships, awards, internships, graduate/medical/law schools, study abroad, or career employment. These letters are extremely important. In fact, they can be *the* key element in a selection process.

University of Oregon's Division of Undergraduate Engagement and Student Success wants to help you achieve your academic and career goals by ensuring that you will receive strong letters of recommendation. As you read through this guide, please remember that if you are unsure about whom or how to ask for a letter, you can always reach out to us for additional advice:

<https://uess.uoregon.edu/divisions-work-0#advising>

#### **Part 1. Requesting Letters of Recommendation**

**Step 1.** Who to ask?

**Step 2.** Where to start?

**Step 3.** How to ask?

**Step 4.** When to ask?

**Step 5.** What to provide?

**Step 6.** Why waive?

**Step 7.** Saying 'Thank You!'

#### **Part 2. Looking for some quick answers? Quick-start guide, the basic Dos and Don'ts**

#### **Part 3. Looking for examples? Example requirements and links**



**Step 1**

1. **Who do you ask for a letter?** Choosing the best recommender for the application.
  - a. There are many different scenarios in which you will need a letter of recommendation (grants, fellowships, scholarships, awards, internships, graduate/medical/law schools, study abroad, career employment, etc.). Not all letters are equal. You want the most relevant recommender for the task, and the recommenders that know you best.
  - b. Identify a recommender based on the function of the letter. Who would write the best letter for a particular application?
    - i. e.g. If you are applying for a research grant, ask a professor or advisor that collaborates with you on research projects or that is an expert in the field of research you are pursuing. Their letter carries more weight.
    - ii. e.g. If you need a non-academic recommender, ask someone in the community that can speak to your leadership skills and/or work ethic. This might be a supervisor or volunteer coordinator, but not someone that is related to you.
  - c. Identify a recommender that knows you well. Anyone can write you a letter of recommendation, but the stronger letters are written by those that know you best.
    - i. Ask people that know you well, you have regular contact and good standing with. These recommenders can write compelling letters as opposed to generic or even harmful letters of recommendation. Graduate schools, employers, and scholarship organizations receive hundreds to thousands of letters of recommendation each year. Your letters need to go beyond generic praise, which does not get you noticed.
    - ii. e.g. If you are applying for graduate school, ask a professor or advisor that knows you well enough to demonstrate your ability to excel in a graduate setting. This goes beyond having enrolled in a class or two with a professor, they need to know you beyond just another face in the classroom.
    - iii. Keep in contact with possible recommenders. Visit office or advising hours to discuss your research or career goals. Maintain contact even after your class ends.



## Step 2

2. **Where to start?** Strong letters come from those that know you best. This means you will need to build a social network of professional contacts and relationships at the University of Oregon.

**Start building those contacts now.**

- a. Meet with your professors/advisors regularly.
  - i. Go to office hours, even if you are no longer in a class with them.
  - ii. Go to advising hours, even if you do not need advice on which class to take.
  - iii. Stay after class to ask questions, e.g. ask about research, research experience, course material, graduate schools, or other courses.
  - iv. Take several classes with a professor that you want to write you a letter.
  - v. Apply or inquire about assisting with research projects.
- b. Contact the mentors in the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program, and get involved in research around campus:  
<https://research.uoregon.edu/plan/undergraduate-research>
- c. Get involved at the UO! Join a club, organization, student government, or volunteer around campus: <https://getinvolved.uoregon.edu/>
- d. Volunteer in the community and take on leadership roles:
  - i. <https://www.eugene-or.gov/370/Internship-and-Volunteer-Opportunities>
  - ii. <https://www.volunteermatch.org/search/orgs.jsp?r=20.0&l=Eugene%2C+OR%2C+USA>



### Step 3

3. **How do you ask for a letter?** Ask in-person first. This demonstrates how important their letter is to you. It also allows you to address initial questions about the letter and the application.
  - a. Keep in mind, a recommender is not required to write you anything and do not owe you a letter. They are doing you a favor. Be polite, not demanding, and don't assume that they will or can write you a letter. They might not have time.
    - i. If you must ask for a letter via email, be professional and formal. Use a proper greeting, be concise and polite.
    - ii. Ask before submitting someone's name as a recommender. If your professor/advisor receives a request from an organization before being asked by you, this can result in a weak letter.
  - b. Ask in a way that gives someone a chance to reflect on what type of letter they can write for you. Asking "Will you write me a letter?" might result in a "Yes", but this doesn't tell you what type of letter you will receive. Try asking "If you feel you know me well enough to write a strong letter, would you please consider writing me a recommendation?" This gives them a chance to reflect, and an easier way out if they are unable to provide you with a strong letter.
    - i. Explain why you choose that particular professor/advisor to write you a letter.
    - ii. Give them time to consider.



## Step 4

4. **When do you ask for a letter?** It takes time to write a strong letter, and professors/advisors are extremely busy, often with tight schedules. Some are asked to write over 20 letters each term. Give your professors/advisors plenty of time to write you a strong and distinctive letter. Do not wait until the last minute to ask!
  - a. Consider how far in advance to ask. Generally, the earlier the better. For graduate school, from 6 months up to 1 year before the application is due is a good time frame to start asking. For grants, scholarships, or study abroad applications, one to three months is a good time frame.
    - i. Asking with less than 1 month to write your letter can result in a rushed letter, which is often a weak letter.
    - ii. Providing at least 1 month or more allows your recommender to reflect on your abilities and performance, and construct a personalized strong letter.
  - b. Follow-ups, Changes, and Reminders.
    - i. If you do not receive an immediate answer for your request to write a letter, give your recommender at least 1 week before following-up. If another week passes without an answer, choose a different person to ask. The delay is a sign that you are more likely to receive a weak letter, if you receive one at all.
    - ii. If someone agrees to write you a letter, make sure to share relevant materials with them (see the next step).
    - iii. You should be prepared to remind recommenders to submit letters on time.
      1. Monitor if letters are submitted, if applicable (e.g. through a graduate school application portal).
      2. Send out a polite reminder about the letter at least 1 week before the deadline, if the letter has not been submitted.
    - iv. Thank your recommender for writing you a letter (see the last step).
    - v. Inform your recommender if you successfully advance to a later stage of competition (e.g. interviews), or if you receive an offer (e.g. awarded a grant or an offer to attend a program). Your recommenders will be happy to hear from you!



## Step 5

5. **What to provide to a recommender?** Providing specific materials to your professor/advisor is essential to write a strong and personalized letter. We recommend that you provide as much of the following material/information as possible:
  - a. Name of the grant/scholarship/graduate school or whatever program you are applying for.
  - b. A description of the program, and a weblink that provides information on the program. This allows your recommender to refer to specifics of the program, or draw connections between your abilities and skills, and what the program is looking for.
  - c. The name and title of the person that will receive the letter, if you know. For graduate schools, you should also provide the name and title of the person that you plan to work with.
    - i. A letter that starts with “To Whom it May Concern” is weaker than a letter that is address to a specific individual or individuals.
    - ii. A letter that inaccurately addresses an individual (e.g. inaccurate use of Mrs., Ms., Mr., or Dr.) can be offensive to a reviewer.
  - d. The deadline for when **you** want the recommendation submitted.
    - i. Do not make this the deadline of your application. Give plenty of time for your recommenders to write and submit a letter before it is actually due.
  - e. How the letter is to be submitted (mailed, emailed, or submitted online).
    - i. Most letters will be submitted online via a portal. A professor/advisor will receive an email from the program with instructions on how to submit their letter online.
      1. Be aware of spam filters. Make sure that your recommender receives the email from the program.
    - ii. If the recommendation is submitted via email, provide the recommender with the email address.
    - iii. If the recommendation is mailed, provide the recommender with a stamped and addressed envelope to mail the letter.
    - iv. If the recommendation is supposed to be returned to you, make sure the recommender places the letter in a sealed envelope, and signs the flap of the envelope first.
  - f. Your connection with the recommender.
    - i. Remind a recommender of the courses you have taken with them, the grades you earned in those courses, the class projects and papers you completed (including copies of your work if relevant), the research projects you have worked on, or the advising points you talked about. This context is important so the recommender can draw on their experiences with you.
  - g. A copy of your curriculum vitae or resume.
  - h. A copy of your most recent transcript. This should be an unofficial copy, which you can send or print from DuckWeb.
  - i. A copy of your Personal Statement/Letter of Intent (or equivalent, if applicable). This will demonstrate why you are interested in the particular program.

- j. Highlights
  - i. Provide your recommender with some highlights that you would like them to touch on in a letter. This might include awards, research experience, life experience, publications, skills, aspirations, talents, interests, or other aspects that make you unique.
  - ii. Provide some detail about those highlights, e.g. explain why or how you have a skill or earned an award.
  - iii. Do not assume your recommender knows what to highlight. Tell them.
- k. Multiple letters from the same Recommender? If you're asking for multiple letters (e.g. applying to several graduate schools at the same time), it is best to provide your recommender with:
  - i. A list of all the schools you are applying to
  - ii. A list of all the mentors/individuals from each school that you plan to work with and why you plan to work with them.
  - iii. Send the recommendation requests at the same time, if possible.
- l. Writing a letter for yourself? Some professors/advisors will ask you to write a recommendation draft for them, which they edit and sign. This is okay, and you should write a strong and professional letter for yourself.
- m. Reminders
  - i. As noted above, send your recommenders a polite reminder about your letter at least 1 week before your deadline. Keep in mind, your professors/advisors are busy, and they may have forgotten about your letter. You can help them prioritize and complete that task by keeping in contact with them.
  - ii. Be careful not to nag, multiple reminders are not necessary (unless you are asked to do so).

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### Step 6

6. **Why Waive to Read the Letter?** Many applications will ask if you agree to waive the option to read the recommendation letters that are submitted, or if want to view them. We strongly recommend that you **agree to waive**.
  - a. If you are concerned that a recommender will write a negative letter, you should not be asking them to write you a letter! That is a sign that you should be asking someone else.
  - b. Waiving the option to view the letter is the only way to ensure that a letter is candid and trustworthy.
  - c. Letters submitted when a student does not waive the option are seen as weaker, less trustworthy, and may even be ignored by reviewers.
    - i. It has been studied that **confidential** recommendation letters carry more weight than non-confidential letters because they are more honest.
    - ii. Some recommenders will not submit a letter unless a student agrees to waive.
  - d. Most letters will be submitted online or via email. However, if a letter is returned to you for submission, make sure it is placed in a sealed envelope and the recommender signs the envelope flap first (see above).

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### Step 7

7. **Saying 'Thank You!' and following-up.** An often-neglected step is being gracious. Don't forget to send a thank you note to your recommenders after your application is **fully submitted**.
  - a. This helps in building a strong professional relationship with your recommenders.
  - b. Written thank you notes provide a personal touch. Emails are fine if you are unable to write a hand-written note.
    - i. Small thank you gifts are also fine, but are not expected or required. Again, be sure your application is fully submitted otherwise this may be mistaken for a bribe.
  - c. Don't wait to send a thank you note. Sharing your appreciation should not be contingent on your success in receiving an award or offer.
  - d. Remain in contact with your recommenders and keep them informed about the application process after submission. It is appreciated.



## UNIVERSITY OF OREGON **Part II. Quick-start Guide. Some Dos and Don'ts**

### **Dos and Don'ts**

1. Do:
  - a. Choose someone that knows you well enough to write a strong and positive letter
  - b. Meet with your potential recommender in person to ask them for a letter
  - c. Meet regularly with potential recommenders to build a professional relationship
  - d. Ask for a letter about 1-6 months in advance of your deadline
  - e. Provide your recommender with necessary materials including information about the program, CV, personal statement, and other highlights
  - f. Double check that your letter has arrived by the deadline, and contact/remind your recommender about the deadline about 1 week before it is due
  - g. Waive the option to read letters of recommendation
  - h. Send a thank you note after your application is submitted
2. Don't:
  - a. Ask someone to write a letter if they only know you as a face in a classroom or they rarely see you for advising
  - b. Assume a professor/advisor will be willing or able to write you a letter
  - c. Wait until the last minute to ask for a letter, generally you need to give a recommender more than 1 month for a letter
  - d. Nag your professor/advisor about a letter unless they ask you to send regular reminders. A single reminder about 1 week before your deadline is sufficient

## UNIVERSITY OF OREGON **Part III. Example recommendations and Links**

Whether you are applying for a grant, fellowship, scholarship, internship, graduate/medical/law school, study abroad, or career employment, you will generally need to provide 3 or more letters of recommendation. Below are some examples of requirements/guidelines for letter of recommendation. You should always check the application guidelines so that you are aware of what the program is looking for in a letter, and what the recommenders need to include in that letter. These are often very different for different programs.

### **Grants and Scholarships**

1. If you were applying for the Barry Goldwater Scholarship, they require 3 letters, and specifically note that the letters are a critical part of being considered for this award. They provide different letter guidelines for research mentors compared to course instructors. They specify that recommenders should focus on the candidate's involvement and contribution to research. You can find this and additional information about the Goldwater Scholarship at <https://goldwaterscholarship.gov/letter-writing-guidance-recommenders/>

2. The Rhodes Scholarship requires 3-4 letters, and also notes that letters of recommendation are a crucial part of the selection process. Letters can only be 2 pages in length, and the focus should be academic excellence, engagement, selflessness, and moral force of character. You can find this and additional information at about the Rhodes Scholarship at <https://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/media/46349/guidance-for-referees-usa.pdf>
  
3. The NSF GRFP requires 2-3 letters, and notes that recommendations longer than 2 pages will not be accepted. Letters should focus on the applicant's potential for contributing to a globally-engaged United States science and engineering workforce, academic potential and prior research experiences, the intellectual merit and broader impacts of the applicant, among other aspects. This and additional information can be found at [https://nsfgrfp.org/reference\\_writers/requirements/](https://nsfgrfp.org/reference_writers/requirements/)
  
4. Letter of Recommendation information for select scholarships can be found at:
  - a. Boren Scholarships - <https://www.borenawards.org/essays#recommendations>
  - b. Churchill Scholarship - <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1D5AaQ-YexIqEistfyMGQghluBzExmoHC/view>
  - c. Critical Language Scholarships - <https://clscholarship.org/applicants/frequently-asked-questions#recommendation>
  - d. DAAD Study and RISE Scholarships - <https://www.daad.org/en/find-funding/faq/faq-study-scholarship-and-research-grants/>
  - e. Emerson National Hunger Fellow– at least 1 letter of recommendation should be from a supervisor (as opposed to a professor or academic advisor).
  - f. Fulbright Scholarship –
    - i. <https://us.fulbrightonline.org/instructions-for-study-research-recommendation-writers>
    - ii. <https://us.fulbrightonline.org/instructions-for-eta-recommendation-writers>
  - g. James C. Gaither Junior Fellows - recommendations can come from anyone the student feels can best speak to their abilities as a potential Gaither Junior Fellow.
  - h. Gates Cambridge Scholarship - <https://www.gatescambridge.org/apply/how-to-apply/>
  - i. Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship - Does not require nor accept letters of recommendation or other supporting documentation from applicants. Applicants are judged solely based on the information provided in their application.
  - j. Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship – <https://goldwaterscholarship.gov/letter-writing-guidance-recommenders/>
  - k. Knight-Hennessy Scholar –
    - i. <https://knight-hennessy.stanford.edu/admission/preparing-your-application/recommendation-letters>
    - ii. <https://knight-hennessy.stanford.edu/advice-recommenders>
  - l. Ernest F. Hollings Scholarship - <https://www.noaa.gov/office-education/hollings-scholarship/prospective/faq#FAQU3>
  - m. Marshall Scholarship - <https://www.marshallscholarship.org/apply/information-for-recommenders>

- n. George J. Mitchell Scholarship - <https://www.us-irelandalliance.org/mitchellscholarship/applicants/endorsers>
- o. National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program (NSF-GRFP) - [https://nsfgrfp.org/reference\\_writers/requirements/](https://nsfgrfp.org/reference_writers/requirements/)
- p. Donald M. Payne International Development (USAID) Fellowship - <https://www.paynefellows.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/PayneRecommenderForm2014.pdf>
- q. Thomas R. Pickering Foreign Affairs Program –
  - i. <https://pickeringfellowship.org/graduate-fellowship/how-to-apply/>
  - ii. <https://pickeringfellowship.org/graduate-fellowship/application-tips/>
- r. Charles B. Rangel International Affairs Fellowship –
  - i. <https://rangelprogram.org/graduate-fellowship-program/application-requirements/>
  - ii. <https://rangelprogram.org/graduate-fellowship-program-application-tips/>
- s. Rhodes Scholarship - <https://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/media/46349/guidance-for-referees-usa.pdf>
- t. Schwarzman Scholars - <https://www.schwarzmanscholars.org/admissions/application-instructions/>
- u. Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowships for New Americans –
  - i. <https://www.pdsoros.org/news-events/2016-09-08-pd-soros-recommendations-a-guide-for-applicants>
  - ii. <https://www.pdsoros.org/apply/guidance-for-recommenders>
- v. Herbert Scoville Jr. Peace Fellowship - <https://scoville.org/overview/documents/>
- w. Harry S. Truman Scholarship - <https://www.truman.gov/apply/advice-guidance/letters-recommendation>
- x. Morris K. Udall Scholarship - <https://www.udall.gov/ourprograms/scholarship/apply.aspx>
- y. Yenching Academy of Peking University Scholars - <https://yenchingacademy.pku.edu.cn/ADMISSIONS.htm>

## Graduate School

1. Graduate School, Medical School, and Law School programs have different guidelines and a require a different focus in a letter of recommendation. Using Departments at the University of Oregon as an example, applying to the graduate program in Physics or History or Anthropology requires 3 letters from faculty or professional supervisors that can discuss your coursework and/or research experience, and your ability to complete a graduate degree. You can find this and additional information in the following links:
  - <https://physics.uoregon.edu/graduate-program-application-instructions/>
  - <https://history.uoregon.edu/graduate/prospective/application/>
  - <https://anthropology.uoregon.edu/grad/graduate-admissions-procedure>



## **Study Abroad**

1. Study abroad applications through the UO Division of Global Engagement, Global Education Oregon, requires 1-2 letters of recommendation. These should be from a professor, instructor, or graduate teaching assistant, and cannot be from an employer, an academic advisor, or a family member. A recommender will be asked to address specific questions on a digital form. You can find this and additional information at <https://geo.uoregon.edu/online-application>

Again, please reach out to the advisors in the Division of Undergraduate Engagement and Student Success if we can be of help in your application process <https://uess.uoregon.edu/divisions-work-0#advising>

