



## Office of Graduate Fellowships

### **Tips and Pointers:**

## **Asking for Letters of Recommendation**

### Introduction

So you need letters of recommendation for a fellowship application... Whom should you ask and how should you approach them? What if they don't know you well? What if they say no? How can you provide instructions without seeming demanding? What can you do to help ensure you get the best letter possible? Here are some tips to make the process easier for you and your letter writers.

### Tips

- Start early! Make your request at least two weeks and preferably one month in advance. Take holidays and other potential delays into account.
- But not too early... if you ask six months in advance the writer will likely forget.
- Talk to your advisor and the Graduate Fellowships Director before you begin.
- If you are a doctoral student, one letter should be from your dissertation advisor.
- Choose referees who will write insightful letters over "big names" who barely know you.
- Give them an "out" – just say, "If you can't do this right now I will understand."
- Provide recommenders with a copy of your written statements and CV/resume.
- Tell the recommender the deadline. Make it readily apparent on any materials you provide.
- Provide the letter writer with the competition's web site or brochure. Consider providing a short bullet-point list briefing the writer on the points/themes to emphasize in their letter.
- Send a polite reminder a few days before the deadline if necessary.
- Say "thank you," and then follow up: Let recommendation writers know the outcome of your application, especially if you received the award.

### If someone says "no..."

- Don't take it personally. Sometimes it's really not about you. They may have too many deadlines or other things going on in their life. Don't assume they don't think highly of you or your work.
- Even if it is about you – for instance, they don't feel they can write a strong enough letter, or don't know you well enough – be courteous and professional and then move on.
- Though it is not a pleasant experience, remember that the person who says "no" is actually doing you a favor. Some people say "yes" to avoid awkwardness and hurt feelings, then submit a lukewarm letter or a rush job. This can be very damaging to your application. For the same reason, don't try to maneuver someone who doesn't want to write into writing. If they say, "I don't think I'm the best person," or "You would do better to ask someone else," take their word for it.

Here are some resources on the Internet with additional advice for students:

<http://brown.edu/academics/college/fellowships/information-resources/asking-recommendations/asking-recommendations-0>

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