

Helping Your Recommenders Help You

Your goal is to help your recommenders write a letter that is effective and speaks specifically about why you are a good choice for the graduate program or fellowship for which you are applying. An all-purpose letter (“I strongly support X for anything or everything whatever it may be”) is less effective than one saying why you are an unusually good choice for a particular program or fellowship. Here are some suggestions for helping your recommenders to help you in their letters:

1. Give your recommenders information about both about yourself and the program or fellowship you are applying for. You can do this with a brief (usually one page) “cheat sheet.” If you are applying to a graduate school: describe the program and explain why it is of particular interest to you. If you are applying for a competitive fellowship: describe the characteristics of that fellowship (e.g., its mission and the personal qualities it is looking for in its recipients) and how you would to use the fellowship.
2. Provide some general background about yourself: your GPA, notable extracurricular activities; important honors or accomplishments. Emphasize the things that are particularly appropriate to what you are applying for. Either include this on your “cheat sheet” or provide a brief resume.
3. If your recommender is a professor whose classes you haven’t taken in a year or two or a supervisor whom you haven’t worked for in a while, bring that person up-to-date about what you’ve been doing.
4. Ask your recommenders if there is any other information they would like to have in order to help them as they write their letters.
5. Give your recommenders ample time to write their letters. Don’t leave them feeling rushed and up against a deadline.

And once everything is done, stay in touch with your recommenders. Let them know how the application turned out!