

Letters of recommendation: How to choose, ask, and help your letter writers

Willamette University Department of Chemistry

1) Choosing letter writers

Your goal is to find the people who can address the important aspects of you in the best and most comprehensive light possible. Usually the people you choose are either a supervisor or professor, former or current. The letter writer should know you well in one or more of the following areas:

- Academic ability
- Interpersonal skills
- Work ethic
- Leadership qualities
- Ability to function on a team

When you consider asking a certain professor, first ask yourself, why might you ask this professor? Are there particular interactions with that professor that stand out to you? Are there areas that you would specifically like the professor to speak to? If so, you can ask them to write about those specific interactions.

2) Asking potential letter writers

Most importantly, **always give adequate lead-time** (>2 weeks). If you are asking for a letter in less than that amount of time, it is very possible that the letter writer will not be able to do it.

Once you have identified the letter writers that you'd like to ask, approach them right away. Ask the professor if s/he believes that s/he can write you a strong/quality letter of reference. You want people to write that know you well enough to say something of substance. Working in a timely manner is crucial because if the first person you ask is unable to write the letter, you'll want to move on to the next one on the list immediately. Email is fine, but asking in person is the most professional way to do it.

Be prepared for any response – yes, no, or that they need time to think about it. Sometimes a professor will decline to write you a letter. They will tell you why, but usually it is because they do not feel that they have had enough experience with you or are unable to write a strong letter for you. Also be prepared to give a due date, because timing can impact a person's ability to prepare a strong letter in time.

3) Helping your letter writers write the best possible letter

Once you have received a “yes”, provide as much information as you can to the letter writer:

- A website or other information about the program/scholarship organization
- A specific due date
- A complete and up-to-date resume that includes awards, extracurricular activities, and employment and/or research experience.
- Any required essay for the program/scholarship (personal statement); a draft is fine.
- An explanation as to why you are applying—motivation, career goals, how this program/award will help you meet your goals, life events leading up to it, etc., as needed.
- A list of courses and dates you have taken with the professor.
- A list of other interactions (TA, research, etc.) with the professor.
- Address of program/organization, to whom the letter should be addressed, and method(s) of letter submission. *Make it as easy as possible for the recommender to find all of the information necessary to submit the letter.*

It helps considerably to make an appointment to chat with the professor about why you are applying to the program/scholarship, what you feel your strengths are, what your goals are, anecdotes, etc. Your “story” provides insight for the letter writer to fully understand why you are applying and how the opportunity fits into your career/life goals. It also gives specifics to draw from as he/she crafts a letter about you.

Note that you do not need to provide addressed/stamped envelopes to faculty in the Chemistry Department. We have official letterhead envelopes and a mail budget.

It is better to ask one professor to write multiple letters than to ask several professors to write one letter. The majority of time investment comes in writing the first letter.

4) Follow-up

Please let us know whether you were accepted or received the award! It’s great to know whether our efforts helped you realize your goals.