

Below are some tips to help you with how to get strong reference letters. This tip sheet provides only general guidance on how to request reference letters for a successful scholarship application. Please read the competition information of the specific award(s) you intend to apply for thoroughly, as reference letter requirements and submission methods may differ.

The Purpose of a Reference Letter / What Reviewers

Use Reference Letters For:

- To get a fuller picture of you, your abilities, your accomplishments BEYOND what is in the application.
- To place accomplishments (awards, contributions) in context.
- Additional information not found in the application.

Before you ask for a letter:

- Figure out how it will be submitted (ex. through appropriate application portal & associated instructions; via email/snail mail to a designate).
- Check requirements; certain competitions recommend at least one reference be from your current supervisor, even if you are newly admitted to your program.

Requesting a Reference Letter/Information to Provide:

- Request as early as possible.
- Ask them in person, or by email; if through a portal, ask before you generate the on-line invitation that will be sent.
- Provide the submission details (ex. do they need to complete a specific form, is it by email, etc.).
- Provide competition details, deadline, and relevant details.
- Provide a copy of your: application, research proposal, papers (if any) current CV or resume, transcript(s) (does not have to be official), and any other relevant information.
- Highlight your academic and non-academic activities – on and off campus with details of exactly what you do – 5 W's (who, where, why, when, what, how).
- Provide some insight into who you are/reflections.
- DETAILS of your research and leadership abilities and experiences.

Who Should Write Your Letter?

- Academics (professor/supervisor/advisor; someone that held a position "above" you) are generally best but it can depend on your project.
- People that know you (ie. not a professor you have never approached).
- Work/employer references are not recommended.
- Someone who knows you, is enthusiastic about you, and sees your value (as a role model, researcher, etc).
- Individuals who can comment on your academic skills, your research abilities/potential, and your communication/leadership skills.
- Individuals who can provide examples to support their points.
- Individuals with whom you have worked closely, with whom you have developed a professional relationship. Shows you developing into a peer.
- Individuals who have good writing skills and have a position of value.
- Should be from a person very familiar with your research AND other abilities – Most recent research supervisor.
- Should be from a person sufficiently familiar with your research and other abilities to provide a meaningful commentary.

Completing Bachelor's degree/just starting graduate program

- Faculty members who have had sufficient opportunity to assess your potential e.g. Undergraduate Research projects/courses or extensive course projects.
- If applicable, can assess the importance of your publications.
- Industrial research supervisor (co-op or internship).

Currently in a doctoral program

- Current doctoral thesis supervisor.
- Prior Master's supervisor (best).
- Faculty members who have had sufficient opportunity to assess your potential at the Bachelor's or Master's level.

Your Reference Letters Should:

- Focus on you and be enthusiastic.
- Support the information in your application; addresses all criteria.
- Provide specific examples of your strengths, accomplishments and contributions.
- Emphasize your academic excellence and research potential.
- Demonstrate why you are of superior caliber, especially with regard to communication, interpersonal and leadership abilities.
- Comment on the quality of your research contributions (publications, patents, reports, posters)
- Comment on the quality of the journals which you have published.
- Comment on your problem solving abilities, analytical skills, creativity, research skills, etc.
- Indicate how referee knows you.
- Include accomplishments and rankings.

What Not to Do:

- Asking someone to write a letter just before/after class, in the hallway.
- Push for a positive response (individual may decline to write a letter, knowing it would not help your application).
- Wait until the last minute to ask for a letter.
- Not provide submission details.
- Not provide supporting information; not provide the information all at once.

How to help your referees

- Follow up with them; send them reminders (most are very busy and have many deadlines)
- Offer to meet with them (if you didn't when you asked them for a letter) if they like
- Give them information/explain the competition you are requesting a letter for (prestige, value, duration, what it will mean to your grad program)
- Be sure to say Thank-you!
- Tell your reviewers about your successes!