Asking for Letters of Recommendation

Scholarship, internship, and graduate program selection committees depend heavily on recommendation letters to gain insight into applicants' personal strengths, weaknesses, and accomplishments. You can take steps to help your recommenders write the most accurate and detailed letters possible.

Cultivate close working relationships with faculty (through coursework or research) early in your undergraduate career. Once you've become acquainted with faculty members, stop by their offices each quarter to discuss your interests and to keep in touch. Do not feel shy about requesting a recommendation. All faculty members and graduate students have done this in the past, and they regard this as a familiar process.

1. **Choose faculty who know you best.** The more detailed and personalized a letter is, the more impact it will have on a selection committee, so ask your instructors with the most extensive, personal knowledge of you and your work.

2. **Ask potential recommenders as soon as you know that you will apply and at least three weeks before the letter is due.** This is simple courtesy. Involve recommenders in the early stages of your application process; their insight will help you decide what to write about and how to present yourself in the application, and their recommendations will reflect their knowledge of your interests.

3. **Begin your request with a conversation about your interests and goals, and then ask if they can write a strong letter of recommendation.** Most likely they will say yes. However, faculty may say no or that a recommendation would cite certain qualifiers or weaknesses. In this case, accept the judgment graciously and consider asking for more feedback on your goals and plan for study.

4. **Once faculty agree to write your letters, provide them with copies of your application materials.** The following items will help them write accurate and purposeful letters:
   a. A link to a detailed description of the opportunity for which you are applying, including selection criteria.
   b. A copy or draft of your application essays, or a summary of your career and educational goals.
   c. A CV, resumé, or other list of your activities (sports, organizations, leadership and volunteer positions, etc.).
   d. A detailed description of your work or research experiences that are most closely related to this specific application.
   e. A copy of your transcript(s) from all colleges/universities that you have attended.
   f. If several quarters have passed since you took a recommender’s course, provide a copy of your paper(s) or class project(s).

5. **Write out all submission instructions and deadlines.** Include information about when and where to submit the finished letters. If the submission is electronic, let them know when to expect to receive upload links. If the submission is paper-based, provide properly addressed and stamped envelopes.

6. **Keep in touch with your recommenders.** After submitting your application, send recommenders a thank-you note expressing your appreciation. Update them on your progress during the stages of the competition and inform them whether or not you are selected for the award. Should you need a recommendation in the future, this kind of follow-up communication will continue to foster a close, positive relationship with your faculty supporters.