

What Faculty Need to Write Your Letter of Recommendation (adapted from Dr. John Kantner)

Letters of recommendation are extremely important to your future and the best letters have plenty of positive details about your achievements. If all the faculty member can say is that you took a course and you were a “fine student”, you may as well kiss that fellowship, grant, graduate program admission, or job goodbye. It is in your best interest to provide recommenders with the information they need to write a thorough and compelling letter.

Do not assume the recommender knows everything about you, your awards or achievements, pertinent job history, or your plans for the future. It’s usually helpful to assume writers know nothing about you. Please remember that you are one of dozens of students requesting letters of recommendation and your recommender does not have all day to track down your transcript, grades, past papers, and so on.

Please follow these guidelines to make your letter of recommendation as effective as possible.

1. Allow **PLENTY of time** for the recommender and follow up with reminders near the deadline. *As anthropologists we sometimes are in internet-inaccessible field sites for months at a time, so please find out what kind of lead time your recommender needs.* Even without field research intervening, you should allow *at least* ONE MONTH for recommenders AFTER they receive the needed information you will provide.
2. Provide details about **where you are applying and why**. Include your statement of intent, **personal statement, and/or proposal** that reveals what you are planning to do with the fellowship, grant, job, or graduate degree for which you are applying. Information about the program/foundation is useful, especially if it’s one with which the recommender is not familiar. Your recommender needs to see your personal statement or proposal well before you send it in, in case there are changes needed. Remember, the recommender’s reputation is on the line in writing for you and mistakes or poorly organized proposals are a lousy reflection on the program, not just you.
3. Include an **unofficial transcript** showing your courses, grades, and GPA. It helps if you provide a list or flag courses you took with the recommender and the topics of any term papers you wrote for the course(s).
4. A **resumé or Curriculum vitae** (academic resumé) is helpful. Include *relevant* experiences, internships, papers written, collaborations with other students or faculty. It’s also helpful (it may be in a personal statement) to let the recommender know if you’ve overcome unusual obstacles in achieving your goals. Information about retail or service positions are not usually relevant for applications to academic positions, programs, or fellowships.
5. **Links, addresses, forms, or envelopes**. Make sure your recommender receives the electronic links, that the forms are filled out as much as you can, and that any snail-mail envelopes are stamped. The packet you give the recommender should reflect the way you want the recommender to reflect on you: mature, organized, professional.

Note: How to Avoid Bad Letters. PLEASE ask your potential recommender if they have sufficient information to write you a positive letter. If the proposed recommender says no, or if they seem hesitant, ask if you can provide more information or thank them for their time anyway. It’s not fun to be turned down, but it’s a lot better than getting a neutral or negative recommendation. (Do not go back to them for other recommendations unless there is a major occasion for changing their mind, such as working closely with them, excelling in another class with them, etc.)