

EARNING YOUR SCHOLARSHIP LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION - Roxana Hadad

Your scholarship application is complete. All that's left is your letter of recommendation. Your work is done, right? Actually, no. Even though you don't write the letter, you're responsible for making sure it gets written. And there's a lot you can do to ensure it's the best letter possible.

Who Should Recommend You?

The best recommendations come from people who have worked closely with you and who understand the award you're applying for. Teachers and professors are excellent sources, but also consider previous employers, coaches, clergy members and community leaders.

Pick someone who can address the award's special criteria or the sponsoring organization's particular interests. For example, the director of the homeless shelter you volunteer at would be a great reference for an award sponsored by a community service group.

Don't ask a family member for a recommendation. Their praise won't have the credibility to impress the admissions staff.

When to Ask for a Recommendation Letter

In most cases, you'll ask for recommendations as you need them; for example, when you apply for college or scholarships. But you should also plan ahead. Start by making a list of potential letter-writers, including names, addresses, e-mail and phone numbers.

Next, compile a file of letters before you need them, especially once you've started college. Ask for letters right after you've finished a course with a professor who likes your work. If you wait until you need the letter (maybe two or three years down the line), you risk losing it because the professor doesn't remember you.

Some colleges can help by maintaining a dossier, or official letter file. When requested, letters from your dossier are sent directly and (if you waive your right to see them) can carry more weight with the judges because they know the recommender was able to express his or her true opinion.

Make It Easy

The people writing your recommendations are doing you a favor, so make it easy for them by being polite and organized. Here's how:

Provide ample time for the letter to be written. Give at least three weeks advance notice.

Make a formal request. Schedule an appointment to discuss the recommendation fully.

Supply your recommender with as much information as possible, including:

Your correct contact information (your full name as it appears on the application, address, email and phone number).
Materials/information needed for the application, including two copies of any forms the recommender is to fill out (for a "rough draft" and a "final draft"); the full title and description of the award; the correct name, title and mailing address of the recipient; a copy of your completed scholarship application/essay; complete instructions on how the letters should be handled; and correct deadline information. Include information about your achievements such as your transcripts, your resume, and reminders of your past work with the recommender (e.g. a description of coursework, a copy of an essay or class project, etc.).

If you're concerned that your recommender has forgotten your letter, gracefully remind them by asking if they need more information.

Once your letter's been sent, be sure to send a thank-you note to your recommender.

It's a lot to keep in mind, but all this work should produce a great letter of recommendation. Which means you can ... whew! ... breath easier.

Letters of Recommendation

Dear Student,

If we are going to write a letter of recommendation for you, we want to do a good job and speak to all aspects of who you are. A complete letter may include: academics, family dynamics, short & long-term goals, activities outside of school, hardships you may have faced, etc. We will need about two weeks to write your letter.

Please answer the following questions and return them to us when you request your letter. You don't have to address each question, but the more information you provide, the better your letter. This can be in the form of a resume, or even just a list. Be sure to put your name at the top!

1. Do you work? Where, and how long have you worked there? What is your work history (any other jobs?)
2. Are you involved in extra-curricular activities at school such as clubs or sports?
3. Are you involved in activities outside of school (sports leagues, church, youth groups, community volunteerism?)
4. Is this letter for a job, college admission, financial aid office at your college, scholarships, community awards, or may I write a general letter so you can use it everywhere.
5. Tell me about your family such as, how many siblings; are you the oldest; do you have responsibilities at home?
6. What do you like to do when you are not in school?
7. What are your long-term goals? (For example, "I want to be a pharmacist" or "I want to major in psychology.")
8. What is your senior project?
9. Anything else I need to know???