

How to ask for—and get—strong letters of recommendation

- 1) **Ask someone who knows you well** and who will be able to discuss in specific detail what distinguishes you.
- 2) **Ask well in advance of the deadline**--allow at least four to six weeks but it is best to consult with the recommender to see how much lead-time is needed.
- 3) Ask: **“Do you feel you know me well enough to write a strong letter of recommendation for . . . program?”** You have now given the professor the opportunity to decline gracefully. If the answer is “no,” do not push.
- 4) **Schedule an appointment with your letter writers** to discuss the program to which you are applying, its selection criteria, your most relevant activities, and to review work you have done in the past for the person.
- 5) **Bring to this meeting:**
 - A current resume or a list of all of your activities and honors.
 - A copy of your personal statement, project proposal, and/or course of study proposal.
 - Any pertinent reminders about the work you have done for this professor that will help you highlight what makes you a strong candidate; past papers or exams are especially helpful.
 - An unofficial copy of your transcript
 - The official description of the criteria the recommender’s letter should address
 - Any coversheets or official recommendation forms that should accompany the letter.
 - If you are asking for more than one letter (as for graduate school or multiple fellowships), provide the following information on a separate sheet:
 - To whom each letter should be addressed (individual or committee, relevant titles, address).
 - Whether each letter should be mailed directly to the program, the CELS Office or Interfolio.
 - The deadline: be sure to distinguish between a “postmark” and a “received by” due date.
- 6) **Talk to your letter writer about how the recommendation will be transferred.** You have 4 options:

If the recommendation will be non-confidential (that is, if the writer is willing to let you read the letter)

 - a. Simply have the letter sent to you. Prepare and deliver to the letter writer, a self-addressed envelope.

If the letter is to be confidential

 - b. The letter writer may submit directly to the receiving institutions, organizations, programs. This is often possible through an electronic process associated with online applications for graduate schools and fellowships, but may also be done via mail. Before you meet, read your application directions thoroughly and go to the meeting with a copy of the directions for the letter writer.

n.b. . . . This is the option preferred by letter writers who want to write specifically for each program to which you are applying, or who prefer not to have their letters reviewed by your graduate school or professional school advisor for selective use in your application packets. In the case of the latter situation, this is the only transfer method available to your letter writers. If your CELS or Interfolio file contains a collection of recommendations each focused on different skill sets or areas of expertise, or if they are targeted to a variety of program/organization types, you may ask your CELS advisor to review your file in order to help compile recommendation packets that best support your current application objectives. Under no circumstances will the content or quality of the confidential letter be revealed to you. The CELS advisor will merely recommend which letters would be most effective as part of the recommendation packet.

 - c. The letter writer may submit hard copies of the letters to The CELS Office where they will be stored (for up to 5 years) until you are ready to open your online credential letter account with Interfolio.

- Go to the CELS website under "recommendations" and download the Recommendation Letter Form. You must fill this form out, indicate whether or not you are waiving your rights to see it, and sign the form before you give it to your recommender.
 - Prepare envelopes addressed to the CELS office. Deliver the form and envelope to the recommender who should complete the form, attach the letter and mail it directly to CELS.
 - When you are ready to use your letters, the CELS Office will forward them to Interfolio, the online credentials service you will use to manage your recommendations (see Interfolio directions below.) If the letters were designated as confidential when submitted to the CELS Office, they will remain so even through the online service. You will simply see the letter title on the list of file contents.
- d. If you have an Interfolio account, the letter writer may submit directly to Interfolio by:
- Electronic upload through an Interfolio recommendation writer's account
 - Traditional mail: **Documents submitted via paper** are scanned and uploaded into the your account
- 7) Finally, be sure to **write your recommenders a note of thanks** and let them know what happens.