Obtaining Effective Letters of Recommendation

Understand what kind of recommendations are expected. Some programs give recommenders specific instructions. Others want them to answer specific questions. Know what’s expected and communicate this information to your letter writers.

Select the right recommenders. The better they know you, the better. The strongest letters for academic research fellowships come from professors in the field. Since your application highlights your accomplishments as a college student, do not ask high school teachers for recommendation letters.

Meet with your potential recommenders and tell them your plans to apply for the fellowship. Also be sure to communicate the selection criteria. If the professor understands the selection criteria, be or she will be able to address them in the letter.

Tell your recommenders why you chose them. This will help them write your letters. For example, if you tell professor X that you chose him because you thought he could speak about your original scholarship or work in a particular lab, this information will help him say just that!

Share a draft of your personal statement and statement of grant purpose well in advance of the application deadline.

Request your recommendation letters at least a month in advance of the deadline, if your recommenders have not written a letter for you before. If they have written one before, then request the letter no less than three weeks in advance, giving them time to tailor it for the fellowship.

Don’t hesitate to send your recommenders a gentle reminder in anticipation of the submission deadline, and don’t wait until the last moment to do so. Professors are busy people. Chances are they’ll appreciate the reminder.