

LEAPS Application Tips I: Letters of Recommendation

November 19th, 2024



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The LEAPS program is supported by Marine Biology, the School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences, and the School of Oceanography

Outline for today

What are letters of recommendation and why do I need them?

Who are good references?

How do I “cultivate” references?

How do I ask for a letter of recommendation?

What do I need letters of recommendation for?

- Scholarships
- Research experiences
- Graduate school
- Internships
- Fellowships
- And many more...
are ubiquitous!

**Most opportunities
(including all of these)
require letters of
recommendation!**



Mary Gates Leadership and Research
Scholarships



NOAA Ernest F. Hollings
Undergraduate Scholarship

LOR



NSF Research Experiences for
Undergraduates



MBARI Summer Internship Program



CICOES Undergraduate Internship
Program

What is a letter of recommendation?

- A LOR serves as an assessment of your abilities/qualifications as they relate to this opportunity
- Written by people senior to you in your field
- “A compelling reference will help reviewers understand how **you stand out from other applicants.**” - NOAA Ernest F. Hollings Scholarship instructions

Who should I ask for a letter of recommendation?

Reference = someone who writes a letter of recommendation on your behalf, or serves as a reference for you that someone evaluating you can contact

It depends on the application!

Make sure to read the instructions from the application!!

- Does it mention what role this person must have (e.g., a professor) or in what capacity they must have interacted with you?
- Is it specific about what type of information they are looking for from your reference?

Examples:

CSUMB REU program:

Two persons who can assess your academic abilities, academic accomplishments and motivation, work habits, potential as a researcher, and your ability to participate in and benefit from a research internship program in marine geosciences.

NOAA Hollings Scholarship:

At least one reference must be from a professor, visiting professor, or lecturer who has taught you at the undergraduate level (lab courses are not acceptable).

General rules of thumb for good references

1. Senior to you in your academic/professional circles
2. Need to be able to speak to your abilities as they relate to this opportunity
 - a. For this reason, your academic adviser is typically NOT a good reference
3. People who you put your best foot forward with
4. People who you have interacted with more recently
5. Who can speak about YOU!

**What does it mean to
“cultivate” a reference?**

Start early and think ahead!

“Every student can benefit from having a faculty member as a reference at some point. You will all need writers eventually, so start planning ahead and developing those relationships with faculty early. Even if you don't need a letter immediately, you will most likely need one later. Think ahead!

- *Luke Tornabene, Associate Professor, UW SAFS*



Good grades ≠ good letters



“I typically receive 25-30 requests and write letters for 10-15 students. I usually have to decline about half of the requests I receive. I decline to write letters for any student who I don't recognize their name or only know them from their grade in one of my courses.” - *Mikelle Nuwer, Associate Professor, UW Oceanography*

“Getting a good grade in a class is fine, but it doesn't translate into a good letter. That is, if I say that a student received a 3.9 on a 4.0 scale in my class of 50 students, that's not going to get them into grad school, or into an internship program, or wherever.” - *Julia Parrish, Professor, UW SAFS & Executive Director, COASST*



What makes faculty excited to write letters of recommendation?



“I am the most excited to write letters for students who have made an effort to engage with course content and myself inside and/or outside of the classroom. I enjoy writing letters for students I have gotten to know over the quarter or over the years and have seen their successes, failures and growth.” -
Mikelle Nuwer, Associate Professor, UW Oceanography

Advice on cultivating references



“Cultivate letter writers as you move through your professional career. This doesn't mean that you should be inauthentic or obsequious, but rather that you should maintain a can-do attitude and go out of your way to be helpful where you're able. First (and second and third) impressions matter. Work to make sure that you are conveying professionalism, enthusiasm, and respect for others.”

- *Chelsea Wood, Associate Professor, UW SAFS*

Some words of encouragement

“Go to office hours, introduce yourself after class, make yourself known. I know it can feel daunting. No matter what stage of your career you are in, 'imposter syndrome' can make you hesitant to reach out to people. This is normal, but you need to make that leap! If it's easier to reach out in email first, do that! ” - *Luke Tornabene, Associate Professor, UW SAFS*



So - cultivate that reference!

- Get to know your instructors so they can get to know you
- Introduce yourself before or after class in the first weeks of the quarter
- Attend office hours or schedule a time to meet with course instructors
- Actively participate during course sessions
- Find ways to interact informally, e.g., before or after class
- Be motivated, enthusiastic, and dependable

Exercise part 1:

THINK + WRITE

Who are one or two people who you might want to ask for a LOR in the future?

What are some barriers to feeling comfortable asking for that letter of recommendation?

Exercise part 2: SHARE

PollEV.com/leaps



Exercise part 3: DISCUSS

What are some strategies that you can use to overcome the barriers that we've identified?

**Why does it matter how
I ask for a letter of
recommendation?**



“In general, **it takes several hours to write a letter** from scratch for a student, if I have the necessary information. **The less info I have about the student, the harder it is to write.** I need a few weeks of lead time to make sure I can allocate the proper time and head-space to writing a good letter.” - *Luke Tornabene, Associate Professor, UW SAFS*

“For students that I barely/don't know, it's pretty quick (<20 min) because I use a template and only use quantitative metrics (grades, participation in class, etc.). **Students barely provide info as to why they are applying for a opportunity, so they tend to be pretty generic.** The more I know them (and the higher the stakes) the longer it takes me (several hours).”
- *José Guzmán, Associate Professor, UW SAFS*



**How do I ask for a letter of
recommendation?**

See the handout!

The email request - general structure

1. An introductory section that includes:
 - a. A reminder of who you are and how they know you
 - b. An explanation of why you are contacting them
2. A description of the opportunity that you are applying for. Include information on:
 - a. Why the opportunity is of interest to you
 - b. The impact it will have on your personal or professional growth
3. A clear request for a letter of recommendation that includes:
 - a. Submission date and details
 - b. Language that allows your reference to decline
 - c. An offer to provide them more information on the opportunity or about yourself

If they accept your request: Additional information to include to help your reference personalize your letter

- CV or resume
- Transcript
- Application materials (essays)
- Talking points or self-assessment/summary statement
 - Letter writers find it incredibly helpful when you provide them with specific examples of what you'd like them to include in their letters. Remind them of the highlights of the time that you spent with them
 - You should have the instructions from the application on references in mind when crafting this

If they accept your request: Additional information to provide on the submission logistics

- Letters of recommendation may be submitted as actual letters, or as forms that your reference has to submit
- Please be sure to provide your references with detailed instructions on how to submit their letter of recommendation!
- If you are asking for multiple letters of recommendation from the same faculty member, provide instructions in a streamlined way (e.g., a table that includes opportunities, deadlines, and submission types)

Between your follow-up email and the submission deadline

- It is imperative that you send your references frequent reminders!
- As long as you are polite, persistent, and enthusiastic, this is greatly appreciated
- Faculty provided different answers to the frequency of reminders:
 - a. At least once a week
 - b. 1 week before and 1 day before
 - c. Three times
- Sometimes references might prove to be unreliable - so it's a good idea to have a backup plan

Keep in touch with your letter writers! And please thank them



“The way that students interact with me after asking me for a letter of recommendation makes a huge difference. If they come back asking for many more letters in the future, it can become annoying, **unless it's a student that keeps me updated on their application journey (i.e., does not treat me as a recommendation letter machine).**”

- José Guzmán, Associate Professor, UW SAFS

Link to module evaluation:

