What to give your letter-writers

Guidelines provided by Dr. Barb Stedman, Director of National and International Scholarships

On a single sheet of paper, front and back (or the electronic equivalent), with your name, address, phone number, and email address at the top, provide the following information in clear, concise language (no long paragraphs).

NOTES: (1) Applicants for a major scholarship should ask Barb Stedman for a “What to give your letter-writers” guidelines that is specifically tailored to that scholarship. (2) These instructions apply only to recommendation letters. If your scholarship requires recommenders to complete a form instead, adapt your guidelines as needed.

1. A brief description of the scholarship

Such descriptions can typically be found on the scholarship website and can simply be copied, pasted, and edited as needed.

If you’re applying for a highly competitive scholarship, be sure to tell your letter-writers that fact, and let them know their letters are of vital importance to your chances of winning the scholarship.

If the scholarship that you’re applying for requires letter-writers to address particular qualities in its applicants (e.g., “promise for future success” or “ambassadorial potential”), be sure to note that information.

2. Selected highlights (in list form) of accomplishments that are pertinent to the scholarship you’re applying for

Contrary to popular wisdom, I do not recommend giving letter-writers your résumé or curriculum vitae. Even a letter-writer who knows and loves you may think, incorrectly, that a good letter of recommendation consists of paraphrasing info that’s on your c.v. Since you’re already stating that information in your application, it should not be restated, line for line, in a letter as well. It may, in fact, hurt your chances of winning a scholarship.

Instead, tailor your list to the scholarship and to each particular letter-writer. Be sure to include reminders of important things that you did while studying under, working for, or otherwise interacting with the letter-writer. Provide approximate dates and short descriptions of relevant and noteworthy projects, papers, etc.

It helps to think about the qualities, skills, or experiences that you hope each recommender will be able to discuss and remind him or her of the details. Don’t just assume that the letter-writer will remember. At the same time, be sure your letter-writers understand that you’re not telling them what to put in their letters, but that you’re simply providing them reference material, should they need it. Most letter-writers will be grateful for the reminders.

3. A sentence or two that describe your plans and goals for graduate school and your career

If you have big plans and visions, don’t be afraid to spell them out for your letter-writer. Most major scholarship foundations award their funds to students who will have an impact on their field and/or on society.

4. Logistical information

a. Length: The optimal length for a letter of recommendation is typically about 1½ pages (or about 1,000 words), but some scholarships place a strict limit on the length. Let your recommenders know if there is one.
b. **Deadline:**

- If you’re applying for a scholarship that has a campus review process, give your letter-writers the campus deadline.

- If there is no campus review, and your letter-writers are sending their letters directly to the foundation, be sure your letter writers know the date by which their letters must be sent or submitted.

- To avoid last-minute headaches, *give letter writers a date that’s a day or two earlier than the actual deadline*, to avoid last-minute headaches.

c. **Submission of letter:**

- If you’re applying for a scholarship that has a campus review process, ask your letter-writers to send their letters to me via email (as an attachment, sent to bstedman@bsu.edu). Let them know that further instructions for submitting the final letter will follow from me, once the campus committee has reviewed your application.

- If you're applying for a scholarship that does not have a campus review process, you'll need to be uploaded to an online application system, emailed to a scholarship headquarters, or sent to a scholarship headquarters in printed form. (In the case of printed submissions, I’m happy to FedEx letters for a recommender.) Give your letter-writers simple, clear instructions about how to submit their letters, whether electronically or in hard copy.

- Some scholarships require a recommender to upload a letter that’s on letterhead and signed; such letters are best saved and uploaded as .pdfs. Other scholarships require a recommender to copy and paste the text into a text box. If your scholarship’s website doesn’t specify which protocol is used, I’ll help you find the answer from the scholarship headquarters.

d. **Formatting tips:**

- *Greeting:* If you’re applying for a scholarship that includes a campus review, provide this line of guidance to your letter-writers: “The greeting line of your letter should not address Barb Stedman or the Ball State campus review committee. Instead, it should address the scholarship foundation or, simply, ‘The Scholarship Selection Committee.’”

- If letters will be submitted electronically, let your recommenders know that an *internal business address is not needed*. (It isn’t expected for any letter, for that matter, but some recommenders feel that a letter is naked without one.)

5. **Misc. tips**

- **Whenever possible, ask for letters of recommendation in person.** Prepare the document described in this handout and take it with you to your meeting with each recommender.

- If possible, ask for letters a month before they’re needed. Never give less than two weeks.

- YOU are responsible for following up with your letter-writers and ensuring that they remember to submit their letters. A week before the due date, send a friendly reminder that the deadline is approaching.

- Remember to send a heartfelt thank-you note to your letter-writers after the letter has been written and submitted. Ask them to save their letters on their computers, in case you decide to apply for other scholarships.

- Let them know the outcome of the scholarship competition!