



A Brookie Guide to:

**REQUESTING A
LETTER OF
RECOMMENDATION**

www.brookeowensfellowship.org

A Brookie Guide to Requesting a Letter of Recommendation

If you've never asked for a Letter of Recommendation before, it might seem like a strange, intimidating, and potentially awkward thing to do. Many of us don't feel comfortable asking for praise -- and that's often particularly true for people in underserved communities. But don't worry: there are good people in the world, and good people like to help other good people succeed. Many times, you'll find that the folks you ask to write you a letter of recommendation are downright thrilled to hear that you've found something that inspires you, and are happy to help you along your journey.

The application to be a 2021 Brooke Owens Fellow requires two Letters of Recommendation:

- One letter that focuses on your **achievements, skills, and potential in achievement-oriented settings** like jobs, classes, labs, certain clubs or extracurricular activities, and more.
- One letter that focuses on your **character, creativity, and consistency in service-oriented settings** like clubs, religious groups, family groups, and more.

This document will give you some practical tips on how to go about getting accurate and impressive Letters of Recommendation -- whether it's for our program or for anything else.

DECIDING WHO TO ASK

The people you ask to write you Letters of Recommendation should be people who have had the chance to get to know you as an individual some time relatively recently.

There are exceptions to every rule, but here are some guidelines you might want to consider.

Someone who knew you really well five or ten years ago is probably not ideal. Not only have you changed as a person, but their memories of you have probably faded. Find someone who will have an impression of you that is recent and still accurate.

Someone who only interacted with you as part of a group might not know you as an individual. Even if someone was incredibly impressed by a team you were on or a group you were in, they may not know your personal contributions -- and even glowing letters that only talk about groups are not nearly as effective as letters that get specific about your skills and your character.

Fame doesn't matter (at least not for our program)... but experience can. Not every program is like this, but here at the Brooke Owens Fellowship, we aren't swayed by letters

A Brookie Guide to Requesting a Letter of Recommendation

written by famous people or by people from well known companies / teams / projects any more than any other. We all know that access to famous people is not equally available to all, and fame-bias is just another form of bias. However, there can be a benefit to getting letters from people who are more experienced in their field, whatever that field may be. If a letter writer tells us that you are the most impressive student / employee / person they have worked with in a 40 year career, that tells us something that no letter from a first-year teacher (or coach, or ...) could. So, don't chase fame -- but do think about letter writers with perspective.

Your letter writers don't have to come from aerospace ... but their interactions with you should have some relevance to your application. We've gotten insanely awesome Letters of Recommendation from sports team coaches, from fellow students, from religious clergy, and more. Those letters were extremely helpful because they taught us more about specific attributes or experiences of a candidate that were particularly relevant to their ability to succeed in our industry -- their work ethic, their creativity, their resourcefulness, their passion, their commitment to service -- even though the letter authors themselves had nothing to do with this industry.

EFFECTIVELY ASKING

If you learn only one thing from this guide, let it be this:

Ask early. As early as possible. If you ask for a Letter of Recommendation the day before the deadline, you might get it... but it won't be as strong as it could have been. The sooner you ask, the more likely they are to say yes -- and the better their letter will probably be.

Seriously, you'd be surprised how many people ask at the last minute. And hey, we've all been there -- if you need to, you need to. But it's better not to need to, right?

Okay, beyond that, here are some other tips.

Ask if they'd like you to send reminders as the deadline approaches. A handful of letter writers might find this annoying, but most will be extremely grateful for gentle reminders especially within a week or two of the deadline.

Tell them what you are applying for -- and why. Don't assume they already know about the Brooke Owens Fellowship. Give them a brief description of the program, and offer to provide them more information by email, phone, or videoconference if they'd like. Don't make them do a ton of research before they even start writing your letter. And

A Brookie Guide to Requesting a Letter of Recommendation

don't be afraid to share a little bit about why you think this program would be a great fit for you or a great step on your career path.

If it's been a while, gently remind them of who you are and how they know you. This can be effectively done in discussing why you are asking them specifically to write the letter. Telling them "I've never forgotten what you told me about ...," "it helped my career more than you can imagine when you..." or "it made a huge impression on me when you..." or something may jog their memory of specific interactions they had with you.

Tell them what the letter should focus on. If this seems awkward, don't worry; you can blame it on us! Tell them our application requires a specific focus (and be sure to tell them which of the two areas of focus you are asking them specifically to write about!).

Give them the logistical information. Don't make them look up how to send in the Letter of Recommendation, what to name the file, where to send the recommendation, or anything else. You want all of their brainpower focused on writing you the best damn letter they can. When you ask for the letter, send them all these details in a condensed format. Don't send them a pre-written letter ... but don't be shocked if they ask you to help them write the letter. Yes,

A Brookie Guide to Requesting a Letter of Recommendation

these are both things that happen, pretty often. Depending on your relationship with the person, you could offer to send some bullet points about you or your resume to help jog their memory of your accomplishments. Sometimes, they may ask you to send them an entire draft of the letter for them to edit or simply endorse. But don't just send along a pre-written letter in your first message.

Not everyone is available to write a good letter of recommendation, so allow them to say no. Use your judgement based on your relationship with the person, but a wishy-washy response may mean they don't think they are able to write you a killer letter right now -- which could mean that they are busy, or that they don't think they are good at writing letters, or any of a million other things. You don't want to push to convince them to write the letter if they are lukewarm on the idea. Most Letters of Recommendation we receive fall somewhere in between "positive" and "glowing," which means a neutral-sounding Letter of Recommendation can be really harmful to your application relative to your peers. Feel free to ask your letter writers if they are comfortable or have the time availability to write the letter, giving them a chance to say no if they are maybe constrained or concerned about writing it.

FOLLOWING UP

This relationship doesn't end the moment they submit their Letter of Recommendation. A little follow-up can help you down the road -- and it may also help others!

Thank you notes are always appreciated. They are taking the time to write this letter not for their own benefit, but for your future success. A thank you shows that you are grateful for their time and energy. And who doesn't want to be appreciated? Whether it's an email or a handwritten note, if you send a thank you to your letter writers, they will notice, appreciate, and remember that.

When you find out if you've gotten into the program, let them know. If you didn't get in but plan to apply again next year, you may want to tell them -- they might have suggestions on how you could improve your application, or they may proactively offer to write you a Letter of Recommendation again next year. If you got in, you should probably thank them again. And you may want to email them again later on -- they may want to share in your successes, and your email may prompt them to suggest the program to future applicants!

OTHER RESOURCES

Still hungry for more information? In addition to talking to your school's guidance or careers offices, you might want to check out these links.

- Khan Academy on [Requesting Letters of Recommendation](#)
- WikiHow's [step-by-step guide](#).
- Business school professor and best selling author Adam Grant's guide on [How Not to Ask for a Recommendation Letter](#)

