SUGGESTIONS FOR REQUESTING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

(Dearing updated 9/18/12)

The strength of any letter of recommendation depends on how much information YOU provide the writer and how easy the information is to access.

When you request a letter, write a clear and organized cover letter that contains all the information below. Be sure the subject line on the email contains the information the writer needs when they go to look for that email to write your letter such as “INFO FOR LETTER RECOMMENDATION.”

And don’t forget the personal touch and write to each individual letter writer separately and write his or her name in the “Dear” line and “request for letter of recommendation” in the subject line. In these days of email overload, most folks tend to close emails when they get to an introductory line that says “Dear committee or dear colleague” or just Dear, so take the few extra seconds and send each person a separate letter.

For every request, be sure to provide in a single email:

1) the title of the award and the agency giving it
2) a brief synopsis of the award
3) the name of the chair of the selection committee and the GEOGRAPHIC address:
   Dr. Joseph J. Schall
   Chair, Big Prize Grant Committee
   University of the Caribbean
   Some Island, Somewhere xxxx

   Just like that so that your letter writer can cut and paste it.
   Yes, you may have to do some work on the internet to find the address but I suggest doing it. Google the name of the chair of the committee. Don’t put the burden on your letter writer, most of them won’t do it for you. Your letter does not look very official missing the header.
4) a paraphrased description of what the award is for OR even better an electronic description of the award. It’s great to list the url of the web site but you ALSO need to paraphrase the award in your cover letter. Why? Because reading through the web site is more work than most letter writers are willing to do. If you leave the information out of your email, they will likely leave it out of your letter.
4) In the cover letter, summarize in a few sentences your proposal and attach the full copy proposal just in case your reference is inclined to read it
5) If your proposal has not changed since they wrote a previous letter, let them know which letter they can recycle for this proposal.
6) Attach your CV (and transcripts if you are an undergraduate). Attach a copy in every new request. Point out any new additions in the cover letter, e.g., I just had a paper accepted to …
7) details on how to send the letters (eg give to you or email myself)
8) In the cover letter, anything you can think of that makes you a great candidate for this award
9) SEND reminders ~1-2 weeks in advance and ALSO THE DAY BEFORE. Include all the info in the reminders so I don’t have to search through my emails to find it

FOR letter writers other than me:

1) give ample time for them to write the letter the first time ~ at least 4 weeks. It takes me at least two hours to write a letter for a graduate student in my lab the first time and anywhere from 10-40 minutes to update existing letters.
2) give them all the same information listed above
3) if it goes by snail mail ASK them if they would like pre-addressed and stamped envelopes as a courtesy
4) remind them one week before!
5) be grateful—you will likely need to ask more than once.