

# NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program

(insights)

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## **III- Letters of Recommendation**

Surprised? Well, don't be. The most powerful way to convince a researcher that you are up to the task is to have a colleague endorse you. Academics have a lot resting on their reputation and integrity, so if they say that someone is good it can't be in vain. The bad news is, it takes years to build a network of strong referrals. It also takes a lot of time and effort to write a strong letter of recommendation. So you must start early.

**The strongest letters only.** These are the only words you need to find your reference writers: "Are you willing to write me a *strong* recommendation letter?" If the person seems reluctant you must find someone else. Good is not enough. Only *great* letters are welcome.

**Personal connection.** Your recommender must know you on a personal level. If (s)he is going to write a platonic letter stating that you took a class and got 'A', then you don't need a letter to convey that information it's already in your transcript.

**Deliberate.** A reference letter should not try to tell your entire life story. That's why you have multiple letters. Each reference writer you chose must fit within a larger plan to paint you as a complete applicant. If all your reference writers are going to use different words to say the same thing then you have wasted their time and yours. Instead, ask each writer to focus on a specific skill that makes you unique. What are the experiences that made you stand out from your peers? What are your unique aptitudes that will translate into a successful research and teaching career? How well prepared are you for your proposed project? If a reference writer knows your proposed graduate school advisor, can (s)he comment on how you would be a good fit for their research group? In their expert opinion, why do you deserve a fellowship.

**Honest.** Don't ever claim something you didn't do. Remember your previous supervisors will read your application essays (to write the letter) and if you claim you did something for them that you didn't it, will reflect negatively on you. If your reference writer asks you to write the text of the letter... find another reference writer. It is very apparent and obvious when the author of the personal statement is the same as the author of the reference letter—and all reviewers whether for the NSFGRFP or a job are wary about participating in a charade. You may be asked by the reference writer to read or edit the letter to be submitted... the general advice you will get is to decline this opportunity.

**Organized.** Have a folder for each reference writer with a check list containing everything you want in the letter: deadlines, instructions on how to submit the letter, etc. Share all

relevant documents: essays, transcripts, a review of what you have done with him/her. When you respect someone's time you are bound to get their best effort (see point 2 as well).

**Start early.** We cannot emphasize this point enough. People are busy. They travel, have grants and research paper deadlines. Your letter isn't the only time-sensitive item on their agenda. That's why you must give your reference writers plenty of time. But more importantly, you want to have time to alter your essays based on your letters of recommendation. Maybe a faculty member will suggest selecting a small school instead of an Ivy League because he has colleagues there. Then you should modify your essay to reflect that suggestion so that your letter complements your application... (this was just an example but remember, you can attend any school in the world once you get the fellowship.) Also you might alter your essay based on who is writing the letters as well.

**A letter unsubmitted is worse than no letter at all !** Remember your reference writers must submit their letters on the NSF website. Make sure you give them ample notice when the deadline is. And periodically send reminders (once or twice at most).

**If your application is incomplete, it will not be considered at all.**