

Tips for Securing Strong Letters of Support

Tailor references to the award

Try to match your referee to the award you are applying to. Before requesting a letter of support, ask yourself: who can best speak to your eligibility for a particular award?

- For a teaching award, it can be helpful to have a past student or mentee write on your behalf. They can address your impact as a teacher and a mentor and how it has impacted their own professional trajectory, research, etc. It is also helpful to ask someone who is/has been responsible for evaluating your teaching; this individual can likely speak to your pedagogical approach, course materials, and the effectiveness of your teaching.
- Reviewers for a travel grant, such as a Fulbright, will want to hear from someone who you've collaborated with internationally, or who can address your ability to serve as a cultural ambassador (i.e.. collegiality, cultural adaptability, and sensitivity to and appreciation for cultural diversity).
- For research awards, consider letters from your department chair, the dean of your college (in some cases), dean of research, past collaborators, and/or top researchers in your field. For the latter, it can be helpful to have someone outside your university speak to the impact of your research on their work, on the work of others, or on an area of study.

If you are early career faculty, your references should no longer be comprised solely of your dissertation committee or postdoc advisor

This can make you appear like a student and doesn't shine a light on your new role as faculty member. Think about how you can expand your references in your first years as faculty. For instance, early on it will be good to include referees from your own institution who can speak to how you are establishing yourself as an independent researcher and a valued colleague.

Read instructions closely

If the application says references are optional, provide references. But make sure your letters will enhance your application. Be mindful of advice about who not to use for a reference. For

example, the following is the Sloan Foundation's advice to applicants for a Sloan Research Fellowship:

“Selection Committees recommend that letters of support be submitted by someone who can speak objectively and knowledgeably about the quality and significance of a nominee's work. Letters submitted by co-authors, personal associates, or professional mentors are, in this sense, less useful to Selection Committees than letters submitted by those with more professional distance from a nominee's work.”

Here the Foundation suggests that you avoid references who may be seen as having a clear bias or a conflict of interest when writing on your behalf.

Additionally, many awards specify the need for letters from scholars outside your home institution. Be on the lookout for such advice. It is important to have at least one individual write on your behalf, who is not from UB. This is especially true in the case of research awards. Ideally, your nominator should be from outside UB.

Seek referees who are past recipients

These individuals were selected because they fit the profile of who the granting organization funds. Given that, they have gained a certain level of credibility in terms of speaking to the potential of a future awardee. Whenever possible, reach out to past collaborators, current or past colleagues, etc. who have won the award that you are applying to. And, of course, seek their support in other ways: ask for advice, sample materials, and/or ask if they are willing to read your materials before submission.

Draft materials before contacting referees

Your referees are busy and writing letters can be taxing when multiplied across all of one's contacts. Make it easier to support your application by doing the following:

- Contact referees early, but not so early that they will forget that you have asked for their help. Ideally, you should ask for a letter of support with at least one month lead time. It is fine to ask earlier, you may, however, need to send periodic reminders.
- Provide drafts of materials so that your referees understand your proposed project and past work, and always provide an updated CV.
- Guide your referees by letting them know what you would like them to highlight about your candidacy. This can also help assure that all of your letters do not read the same. In that respect, consider asking each referee to address different aspects of your

candidacy based on your individual relationship/history. In some cases, the instructions will provide details on what letter writers should address. Make sure to convey this to your referees rather than assuming they will read the online instructions.

- Provide phrases and content that referees can directly use in letters of support. The easier you make the process, the more likely you will receive a strong letter. If you are providing exact phrases/sentences, make sure not to provide the same info to each of your referees.

Set clear deadlines

The semester gets busy, so it is important to provide an internal deadline that is before the actual deadline. Also set internal deadlines for yourself to send reminder emails to your referees.

Do not recycle letters

If you had someone write for you in the past, make sure that you highlight what has changed about your candidacy since they last wrote. You want to avoid stale or outdated letters at all costs. Reviewers can tell when a letter has been recycled. For some awards, your application may stay active for 2-3 years. In this case, it is still important to update your application or nomination packet with the most relevant information.