

Tips for Recommendation Letters

Recommendation letters, also called letters of support, help the reviewers of your award nomination gain a better understanding of you as a person and student. Not sure how to ask a faculty or staff member for a letter of recommendation? Check out these tips!

Develop a list of potential recommenders: Your list should include staff mentors, supervisors, or faculty members who know you for more than the grade you earned in their class. It would be ideal if the staff or faculty member taught you in more than one class, supervised you on a research project or paper, supervised you in a student staff or leadership role, and could speak to your personal qualities as well as abilities.

For University Student Awards, your recommendation letters can also include letters from peers who worked with you on an event or project. Your nominator does not need to provide an additional letter of recommendation because they will be providing a “nomination narrative” of why they are nominating you.

Ask early: Thoughtful letters take time to prepare! Ask for the letter in person, if possible. Use office hours or make an appointment. Note that many staff and faculty receive requests to write dozens of recommendations per year, which is a commitment of time and effort beyond other university responsibilities.

Ask your potential recommender, “Do you feel you know me (my academic abilities, interests and leadership skills) well enough to write a letter for X award? This gives your professor the chance to decline gracefully.

Provide relevant information: Share award details, instructions on the submission process, and links to the relevant webpages. Include the name/office of the person receiving the letter and a deadline for submitting the letter. For University Student Awards, your recommender can send the letter to you to upload to your nomination or email it directly to CampusLife@american.edu. Letters should be specific to the criteria of the award.

Include any materials you may be submitting for the nomination, such as your resume and any essays or supporting materials, as a reminder of your experiences and to help them in understanding how their letter can support the nomination. If you have not done so already, make an appointment at the AU Career Center (5th Floor, Butler Pavilion) for assistance in writing a professional resume. Make sure that your resume reflects the qualifications requested by the specific award (such as special research skills, community service work, and leadership experience).

Follow up: Connect with your recommender a week or so before deadline to see if they need any additional information to complete your letter. This is a gentle way to remind them of the deadline.

Show appreciation: Acknowledge your recommenders for their hard work on your behalf. Send them a thank you note and do not forget to let them know the outcome! Nominators and recommenders of the selected recipients will be invited to the Awards Program and Reception to cheer you on.