Strategizing Your Recommendation Letters

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Thinking about recommendation letters can be scary. Let’s break them down.
Recommendation letters are a crucial part of applications.

- PhD applications typically ask for 3+ letters.
- Fellowships typically ask for 4 letters.
- Best case scenario: glowing, personal recommendation letters from 3+ famous research professors in your subfield.
- Worst case scenario: 3+ letters from people who secretly hate you.

*We are all somewhere in the middle!*
Reminder: letters are just one component of your app.
You can help your writers help you.

- Ask for a letter at least a month before the deadline.
- Send periodic reminders (one month, two weeks, three days, day of).
- Prepare a packet about yourself, the work you’ve done together, the programs you are applying to, and the deadlines.
  - We will work on this today!

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Don’t be afraid to ask for multiple letters.

- People know what they can handle and will say no if they can’t do it.
- Professors are used to writing plenty of letters for plenty of people.
Let’s plan our recommendation letters together.
1) List everyone you have ever worked with.

- This list can include:
  - Professors
  - Research advisors
  - Employers
  - Club advisors
  - Postdocs and PhD students
  - Internship supervisors
  - TA supervisors

- Don’t worry about what or how much you’ve done.
- Just start writing people’s names.
2) List the qualities about yourself you want to emphasize.

- For example:
  - Research expertise
  - Teaching excellence
  - Leadership
  - Compassion
  - Dedication
  - Motivation
  - Past projects
  - Personal background
  - Quick learning

- Bonus: you can include these qualities in your personal statement too.
3) Circle all the people from (1) that can talk about (2).

- No limits: circle as many as you want, but try to aim for at least 3.
- Definitely include anyone who has supervised you for research.
4) Deep dive into each person from (3).

- For each person, list how you met and what you worked on together.
- Be sure to include details relating to (2)--but not every person needs to cover every detail.
- To be even more helpful, include dates!
5) Ask for **strong** recommendation letters!

- If you haven’t spoken to your potential writer for a while, you can ask for a 30-min chat to catch up before asking.
- You can also email your potential writer.
  - Be sure to include your CV/resume, any important updates, and deadlines.

“Can you write me a **strong** recommendation letter?”
Questions?