

REQUESTING A LETTER OF REFERENCE

Dear SOARS applicant,

For many of you, your application to SOARS will be your first application to a scientific research program. Consider this application process as part of your professional development and view the steps involved as learning opportunities. Among the many important inputs that contribute to your success are positive letters of reference in support of your application. You can affect the quality of your letters of reference for this and future applications by positive communication with your referees.

WHAT ARE THE KEY COMPONENTS OF A GOOD LETTER OF REFERENCE?

A reference letter should be a concise (less than one page) yet substantive description of the distinguishing features of the candidate. Referees should speak with personal knowledge of not only a candidate's scholastic achievements but also of personal and professional achievements and have an eye toward to the candidate's goals.

WHAT IS THE RIGHT WAY TO REQUEST A LETTER OF REFERENCE?

There is no one right way, however consider a few things ...

A) DECIDING ON A RECOMMENDER

A Guideline for Selecting Recommenders

When selecting your letter writers, consider three criteria:

- Do they know you well enough to write about you in a detailed, persuasive way?
- Will they say good things about you?
- Are they reliable? Will they get it in and on time?

Think about:

- Who has the most intimate knowledge?
- What will they say? What kind of specific, good things?
- Are they "key people" (e.g. faculty you worked with on an independent study project and/or an Honors Thesis)?
- Are you comfortable asking them what they might say in a letter? Will they talk about you in class? Your project?

An effective letter should address your intellectual capacity, work habits, social skills, and academic preparation.

Make sure that the writer:

- Has Credentials
- A depth of knowledge of students and how you

compare

- Can testify to your intellectual capacity
- Can speak to your work habits
- Will speak to predictions for your success
- Address any blemish if necessary
- Speak to your preparation for the experience

B) YOUR ATTITUDE

Requesting of a letter of reference can be intimidating if you have never done this before. Approach your referees with humility but confidence. Remember that many educators and professors consider it their professional responsibility to write letters for their students and advance their students' careers. Many are happy to do so. Writing reference letters is not a one-way street; educators are proud to be associated with promising young people.

C) USING YOUR TIME WISELY/ MAKING AN APPOINTMENT

Do just spend five minutes and ask your professor for a reference right after class or in the hallway. Ask if you can make an appointment or come to office hours to discuss your application. Be prepared with a sentence like, "Professor X, I would like to request a letter of reference from you. Is there a time that we could meet briefly so that I can tell you about the SOARS program and my interests and career goals?"

Before attending your meeting, prepare an outline of subjects about your professional and personal accomplishments and your goals that you might like to cover. Be prepared to talk about undergraduate research, any important volunteer activities, and your interests. When you attend a meeting with your referee bring your resume; a piece of paper with your name, the SOARS website and deadlines; and copies of any relevant research papers. Ask questions where appropriate. Consider this an exchange and collaboration.

D) CULTIVATING A RELATIONSHIP

Requesting a letter of reference is not just a one-time event. Follow up; let your referee know the status of application and continue to follow up. If you are admitted, remember to thank your referees! If you are not admitted, remember to thank your referees! Your referees may offer good advice and present further opportunities. At the end of your summer research program stop by and tell your referee about the research experience. Cultivate a professional relationship with your referee; the interaction may evolve to be a mentorship relationship or an enduring professional contact.

This is intended as guidance only. Obviously one of the most important things is for you to choose your references carefully and trust your own best judgment.

Good luck!