

Get Great Letters of Recommendation

2025 S-STEM Scholars Meeting
Dr. Jen Sorensen, Seattle University

supported by: Dr. Megan Kowalkse, Western Michigan University

1

Introduce yourself to others at your table

Get to know your peers:

What is one thing you would want a professor to say about you in a recommendation letter?



2

Welcome! Link to session in Whova:



Please answer the two poll questions in Whova if you haven't yet:

- What's your biggest concern about asking for a recommendation letter?
- The next time you request a recommendation letter, it will probably be for...

3

Let's check the polls...

What's your biggest concern about asking for a letter of recommendation?

- Not knowing who to ask.
- Feeling awkward or nervous.
- Not sure how to ask/what to include in request.
- Worried the letter won't be strong.
- I have a different concern.

The next time you request a recommendation letter, it will probably be for...

- Graduate school
- Internship or summer research
- A job
- Scholarship or fellowship
- Something else

4

Our goals:

1. Develop YOUR list of soft skills and examples of how you have demonstrated those skills.
2. Understand professional expectations for requesting a recommendation letter.
3. Apply a framework for requesting recommendations that results in high-quality letters.
4. Feel confident asking for recommendation letters!

5

Opening brainstorm:

Think of an internship or job you might apply to.
What non-technical skills do research supervisors and employers value?

- 1. Small-group discussion at your table.**
2. Whole-group sharing via word cloud.

6

Articulating YOUR soft skills

1. Take 3 minutes to scan through the list of example skills:

- Original document online via QR code
<https://joinhandshake.com/blog/students/soft-skills-examples/>
- Excerpted document hardcopy, 1/table
- Excerpted document pdf on Whova



2. Individual journaling time, 5 minutes:

- Choose 3 of these skills that are strengths of yours
- What are **specific examples** of you displaying these skills?

7

Why this matters:

- Your recommendation letter is much more than your grades! It should draw a picture of who you are and how you operate.
- You can help your recommenders write great letters by “coaching” them on your skills and attributes.

8

Activity: Sample letters of recommendation

- Form teams of two.
- Review the two sample letters – for the same student
 - A few print copies on each table
 - Electronic version on Whova
 - Projecting on screen
- Discuss with your partner: what do you notice?

9

Letter #1

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing to recommend Alex Johnson for your summer research internship. Alex was in my microbiology class last year. He attended regularly and turned in all his assignments on time. He seemed interested in the material and got decent grades.

I think he would do fine in your program. He is polite and gets along with others, and is capable of doing good work.

Please let me know if you need anything else.

Sincerely,
Dr. Green
Biology Department

10

Letter #2

To Whom It May Concern,

I am delighted to recommend Alex Johnson for your summer research internship. I have had the pleasure of teaching Alex in two upper-level biology courses and mentoring him in our department's undergraduate research program over the past year.

Alex consistently demonstrates intellectual curiosity, analytical rigor, and a strong commitment to scientific inquiry. In our Molecular Biology course, he not only excelled academically—earning one of the top grades in the class—but also contributed thoughtful insights during discussions on gene expression and regulation. His final project, which explored CRISPR applications in plant genetics, was exceptionally well-researched and clearly presented.

Beyond the classroom, Alex has been an integral part of my lab team, assisting with a study on microbial resistance. He quickly mastered lab protocols, maintained meticulous records, and even proposed a modification to our experimental design that improved data consistency. His initiative and collaborative spirit make him a standout among his peers.

I am confident that Alex will thrive in a research-intensive environment and contribute meaningfully to your program. He is not only academically strong but also deeply passionate about advancing scientific knowledge. Please feel free to contact me if you need any additional information.

11

Asking for a letter of recommendation

- Who would you ask?
- Why ask that person?
 - *See next slide*
- How and when would you ask?
 - *See following slide*

12

Choosing who to ask

- Can they demonstrate a relationship with you?
- Are they credible/appropriate for the opportunity?
- Can they write about the skills/attributes that align with the requirements of the opportunity you're applying to?
- Can they cite specific examples?

13

How and when to ask for a recommendation

- Email works well to start the conversation
- Give as much lead time as possible; 3-4 weeks or longer
- Build a folder of materials to keep on hand:
 - Resume or CV
 - Transcript
 - Personal statement or goals statement
 - You don't always need to provide these, but it's good to offer them!

14

Strategies for making your “ask”

- Align the recommender (and what they know about you) with the requirements of the opportunity.
- What does your recommender know about you (e.g., your skills and characteristics) that you would want them to write about?
- What are specific examples your recommender has observed that could be used as evidence of these skills/characteristics?

15

Activity: Practice requesting a recommendation

- Think of an opportunity you have or would like to applied for
Nothing in mind? Apply for a summer research program!
- Make a plan to request a recommendation (email or conversation)
- Items to include:
 - Greeting
 - What you’re applying for
 - Why you’re asking them
 - Specific examples that demonstrate relevant skills/behaviors that your recommender has witnessed – *this is the secret sauce!!*
 - **Submission details and deadline**
 - Information that you are providing (personal statement, recc form, etc.)

16

Whole group sharing: role play request

17

Closing the loop

- Follow up with the recommender – a polite reminder is OK.
- Your application has been submitted – now what?
 - Email/tell your recommender that you have submitted; thank them for supporting your application.
 - When you hear the results of your application, **let your recommenders know!**
- Keep the relationship alive; you may ask that recommender again.

18

Q&A

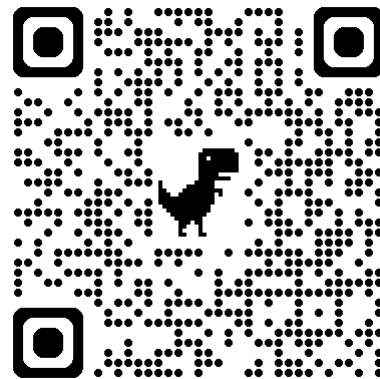
- Let's see what's on Whova!
- You are also welcome to ask questions “live”

19

Provide Your Feedback on:
Get Great Letters of Recommendation

Survey Link:

[https://airtable.com/appMqgBJxZT21jAQH/
pagKVWI9OVGZ1pR1h/form](https://airtable.com/appMqgBJxZT21jAQH/pagKVWI9OVGZ1pR1h/form)



20