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PATTI GRACE SMITH FELLOWSHIP'S GUIDE TO
REQUESTING
LETTERS OF
RECOMMENDATION

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GRACE SMITH
FELLOWSHIP

Patti Grace Smith Fellowship

A GUIDE TO....

GETTING THE PERFECT LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

As part of your application to become a Patti Grace Smith Fellow, we require you to find two people willing to submit letters sharing their perspective of you and recommending you for the program.

If you've never asked for a Letter of Recommendation before, it might seem like a strange, intimidating, and potentially awkward thing to do. Many of us don't feel comfortable asking for praise — and that's often particularly true for people in underserved communities.

But don't worry: there are good people in the world, and good people like to help other good people succeed. Many times, you'll find that the folks you ask to write you a letter of recommendation are downright thrilled to hear that you've found something that inspires you, and that they are happy to help you along your journey.

The application to become a Patti Grace Smith Fellow requires two Letters of Recommendation:

- One letter should discuss your aptitude, skills, passion and potential in your chosen field or fields, whether that be engineering, science, policy, business, journalism, or whatever else. In a sense, this letter is about *what you can do well now*, and *what you might be able to learn to do well in the future*.

- One letter should discuss your character, creativity, and consistency. These are traits that people bring to every part of their life: not just school and work, but also home, clubs, religious groups, community organizations, and more. In a sense, this letter is about *you who fundamentally are as person*.

This guide will give you practical tips on how to go about getting useful and impressive Letters of Recommendation — whether it's for our program or for anything else.

STEP ONE: SELECT THE RIGHT PEOPLE TO WRITE YOUR LETTERS

The key to getting great letters of recommendation is finding the right people to write them. Asking the right person is about 90% of the journey, we'd estimate.

Everyone's circumstances are different, and there are exceptions to every rule, but here are some guidelines you might want to consider:

Someone who knew you really well five or ten years ago is probably not ideal. Not only have you changed as a person, but their memories of you have probably faded. Find someone who will have an impression of you that is recent and still accurate.

Someone who only interacted with you as part of a group might not know you as an individual. Even if someone was incredibly impressed by a team you were on or a group you were in, they may not know your personal contributions — and even glowing letters that only talk about groups are not nearly as effective as letters that get specific about your skills and your character.

Fame doesn't matter (at least not for our program)... Not every program is like this, but here at the Patti Grace Smith Fellowship, we aren't swayed by letters written by famous people or folks with fancy job titles. We all know that access to famous people is not equally available to all, and fame bias is just another form of bias. We'd value a thoughtful and highly personal letter from a person we don't know much about over an impersonal letter from a Nobel Prize laureate or CEO every day of the week.

... **but context and relevancy do matter.** While we aren't swayed by fame of flashy titles, the more your recommender understands about the jobs you might do and the other candidates vying for those jobs, the better a case they can make for you. If a letter writer

tells us that you are the most impressive person they have worked with in a 40-year career, that tells us something that no letter from a first-year teacher (or coach, or ...) could. If they can make the connection between a thing you accomplished in the classroom or in their organization and how that might apply at an aerospace company, that guides the reader to understand the linkage. So, don't chase fame, but do find letter writers with a useful perspective.

Your letter writers don't have to come from aerospace; in fact, we generally expect that they will not come from our industry. However, you should pick recommenders whose interactions with you have some relevance to your application to an aerospace fellowship program. We've gotten incredible Letters of Recommendation not only from professors and bosses but also from sports coaches, fellow students, religious clergy, and more. The most helpful letters are those that teach about specific attributes or experiences of a candidate that are particularly relevant to their ability to succeed in our industry — their work ethic, their creativity, their resourcefulness, their passion, their commitment to service — even if the letter authors themselves had nothing to do with this industry.



STEP TWO: ASK EARLY, ASK POLITELY, AND PROVIDE CONTEXT

If you learn only one thing from this guide, let it be this:

Ask your recorders for a letter early. Seriously. As early as possible.

If you ask for a Letter of Recommendation the day before the deadline, you might get it... but it won't be as strong as it could have been. The sooner you ask, the more likely they are to say yes, and the better a letter they will write.

Seriously, you'd be surprised how many people ask at the last minute. And hey, we've all been there — if you need to, you need to. But it's better not to need to, right?

Okay, beyond that, here are some other tips.

When you ask, don't take it for granted that they will say yes. Life happens to all of us — and that's just as true for the folks writing the letters as it is for those asking for it. They may be busy, or they may hate writing, or they may not think they can write you a particularly strong reference. Be courteous and polite when you reach out, and ask your letter writers if they are comfortable with and have the time available to write the letter, giving them a chance to say no if they may be constrained or concerned about writing it. Use your judgment based on your relationship with the person, but a wishy-washy response may mean they don't think they are able to write you a killer letter right now, and you don't want to push if they are lukewarm on the idea. Most Letters of Recommendation we receive fall somewhere in between "positive" and "glowing," which means that even a warm-ish Letter of Recommendation can be really harmful to your application relative to your peers.

Send them a reminder as the deadline approaches. Most people will be extremely grateful for a gentle reminder. If it's getting down the final day before the deadline, you may even want to send them a second reminder. Our system should send them an automatic nudge, but act as though that nudge is likely to get caught in a spam filter. Reach out to them in person, by phone, by email, or in whatever way you are most confident will respectfully catch their attention.

Offer them context about what you are applying for and why. Don't assume they already know about the Patti Grace Smith Fellowship. Give them a brief description of the program, and offer to provide more information in person or by email, phone, or videoconference if they'd like. Don't make them do a ton of research before they even start writing your letter. And don't be afraid to share a little bit about why you think this program would be a great fit for you and a great step on your career path.

If it's been a while, gently remind them of who you are and how they know you. This can be effectively done in discussing why you are asking them specifically to write the letter. Telling them "I've never forgotten what you told me about ...," "it helped my career more than you can imagine when you..." or "it made a huge impression on me when you..." may jog their memory of specific interactions they had with you. You might also want to offer to share other parts of your application with them if they want; many recommenders won't need or have time for that, but others will be excited to freshen up on what you've done since they worked with you most closely.

If you have a particular story or topic you want the letter to focus on, tell them! If this seems awkward, don't worry; you can blame it on us. Tell them our application requires a specific focus. And this probably goes without saying, but: be sure to tell them which of the two types of letter you are asking them to write! Most programs just ask generically for a letter of recommendation, so they probably won't ask you if there is a specific topic.

Give them the logistical information. The only thing that your recommender needs to do is upload their letter using the link sent to their email by Survey Monkey. You want all of their brainpower focused on writing you the best damn letter they can. When you ask for the letter, send them all these details in a condensed format.

Don't proactively send them a pre-written letter ... but also don't be shocked if they ask you to help them write their first draft. These are both things that happen. Depending on your relationship with the person, you could offer to send some bullet points about yourself or your resume to help jog their memory of your accomplishments. Sometimes, they may ask you to send them an entire draft of the letter for them to edit or simply endorse. But don't just send along a pre-written letter in your first message.

STEP THREE: FOLLOW-UP

Your relationship with your recommenders doesn't end the moment they submit their letter. A little follow-up can help you down the road — and it may also help others!

Thank you notes are always appreciated. After all, these folks are taking the time to write this letter not for their own benefit, but for your future success. A thank you shows that you are grateful for their time and energy. Whether it's an email or a handwritten note, they will notice, appreciate, and remember that you took the time to say thanks.

If you get into the program, let them know. They clearly support you, so let them join in the celebration! And you may want to email them again when you've started your internship or taken some other big step; you can update them about your journey and its details and recognize you couldn't have gotten here without their help. Not only will they be excited to share in your successes, your email may prompt them to offer you new ideas for how to make the most of your Fellowship experience, or may help remind them suggest the program to future applicants!

WE WISH YOU THE BEST OF LUCK!

