

SSSI RESOURCE · APPLICATIONS

The Recommendation Letter Brief

What to send your recommenders so their letters arrive specific, on time, and aligned with what the program is looking for.

Why most recommendation letters are weak

A weak letter is general. It says you are 'hard-working, intelligent, and dedicated' — words that fit any candidate. Admissions readers learn nothing.

Strong letters are specific. They describe a moment, a problem, a decision. The reader walks away knowing exactly what kind of student you are in a classroom or a workplace.

Your recommender's job is to write the letter. Your job is to make that letter possible by giving them everything they need in one short brief.

Whom to ask

- A teacher who has graded your written work, not just your exam scores
- Someone who has seen you in a group — class, club, project — not only one-on-one
- Someone who knows your work in the subject area closest to your intended study
- Avoid: distant senior figures (a minister, a chief, a bishop) who do not know your daily work

One specific letter from a Grade 11 maths teacher beats five generic letters from politicians. Always.

When to ask

- First conversation: at least 6 weeks before the deadline
- Brief sent: at least 4 weeks before the deadline
- Follow-up reminder: 2 weeks before
- Final reminder: 5 days before
- Thank-you message: within 48 hours of submission
- Update message: when you receive your result

How to ask — the first conversation

Ask in person or by phone. Email comes later. The first ask should sound something like:

'I am applying to [program name] for [year]. The deadline is [date]. The program looks for [1–2 qualities they emphasize]. I would value a recommendation from you because you have seen [specific work, project, or moment]. Would you be willing to write me a strong letter by [date 1 week before the official deadline]?'

Notice the word 'strong'. Asking 'would you write me a strong letter' gives the recommender a graceful way to decline if they cannot. That is what you want. A lukewarm letter is worse than no letter.

The brief — what to send by email

Once they agree, send a single email containing the following sections. Keep the whole thing under one page.

1. Program details

- Program name, university, country, level (undergraduate / master's / PhD)
- Exact deadline with timezone
- Link to the official program page
- How they will submit the letter (Common App portal, university form, direct email)

2. What the program is looking for

Quote 2–3 phrases directly from the program's website — 'demonstrated leadership in your community', 'commitment to public service in Africa', 'capacity for independent research'. This focuses the recommender on what to emphasize.

3. Three specific moments you shared

This is the most important section. List three concrete moments the recommender witnessed — a question you asked in class, a project you led, a problem you solved. Each should be 2–3 sentences. These give the recommender the raw material for specific anecdotes.

4. Your CV and personal statement (attached)

Attach your one-page CV and the latest draft of your personal statement. The letter should complement, not contradict, the story you are telling elsewhere in the application.

5. Practical details

- Your full legal name (as it appears on the application)
- Your email and phone number
- A reminder of how they will be contacted (most online systems email a link)

A model brief email

Dear Mr Deng,

Thank you for agreeing to write me a recommendation letter for the Chevening Scholarship 2026. The submission deadline is 5 November 2026, 12:00 GMT. The Chevening portal will email you a request link within 24 hours.

Chevening is looking for evidence of 'leadership and influence' and 'strong relationship-building'. Three moments from our work together that may be useful:

- 1. The Senior 4 mathematics revision class I organized in 2024 — 23 students attended weekly for 6 months. You observed two sessions and gave feedback on my teaching approach.*
- 2. The day I disagreed with your interpretation of the integration problem on the mock paper. You asked me to present a counter-proof to the class the following Monday.*
- 3. The funeral fund for John's family in May 2025 — I coordinated contributions from 40 classmates and presented the total to his mother.*

My CV and personal statement are attached. Please let me know if any of these moments need clarification.

*With deep gratitude,
Akon Kuir Garang*

Send the brief in plain text. No fancy formatting. The recommender should be able to copy details directly into their letter.

After they submit

- Thank them in writing within 48 hours
- Confirm submission was received (check your application portal)
- Send an update when you receive a decision — positive or negative
- If admitted, send a final thank-you message naming the program and starting date