We all need 3-5 letters of recommendation (LOR) for applying fellowship, grant, or a new position at some point. Here is some great advice about LOR from Dr. Arinana Long.

It's application season. In just a couple of years, I went from a near-total rejection rate to a 100% success rate for everything I've applied for. In addition to luck + timing, one of the biggest changes I made came from letters of recommendation. Let me show you how. I know what you're thinking "Arianna, we all have to get LORs, that's not unique. So how is that an advantage? Plus we have no control over what's in the LOR, so it's pointless." TRUST ME. There is a way to wield your LORs like a sharp-tipped, freshly-made sword my friends.

The internet will give you the bare bones: ask your letter writers a month out, provide them with your materials and CV, and remind them of deadlines. But this is just the beginning! You can do SO MUCH MORE and get even more impactful LORs from your mentors. Here's what I do:

Look through the application criteria/solicitation. What language do they use to describe winners? E.g. "high-impact science", "evidence for leadership", "excellence in public communication", "creative", "well-organized". Pull out these phrases + start listing evidence for them. ALL THE EVIDENCE, Including things that you might not include in your written materials. Did you organize a journal club? Did you write a cool sci-comm piece for K12 audiences? Did you mentor other students? Did your work get cited in a review paper? WRITE IT DOWN.

Then make a new page, split up your letter writers, and begin assigning each item to your letter writers. Try to give them "themes": e.g. I usually have 2 science + leadership-focused writers and 1 who speaks more to my interpersonal endeavors (e.g. mentorship, adversity). Don't get me wrong: all of them will be provided with evidence of my scientific excellence, but in addition to that I ask them each to also emphasize these 2-3 other amazing aspects of me / my work that I either didn't have room for or didn't fit into my narrative written pieces. Often it's an additional elaborative point. E.g. maybe I mentioned co-founding a mentorship program in my app, but I'll ask my LOR writers to talk about the impact of the program on the dept (community impact), and how I helped secure funding for that program (grant writing skills). Other times it's something that I don't want to detract from my materials but is very relevant to my application. E.g. I may ask a LOR writer to highlight how my "low" undergrad GPA stemmed from working multiple jobs to pay bills and taking care of an ill parent. The latter example is critical for my first-gen / low-income friends. It can be hard to write effective statements that also include this context without coming off as "whiny" or "making excuses." So ask your letter writers to reframe it! E.g. "Isn't it amazing that Arianna went through all that crap and remained organized, balanced two jobs, school, and lab research? This shows that she's an excellent project manager, will succeed in juggling all the demands of grad school, and will be a powerful PI one day."

Feel free to write that language for your letter writers. Give them the evidence, but also give them some phrasing. Tell them *exactly* the language the app is looking for. By providing both evidence + starting language, you make it much easier for them to write a high-impact LOR.

I compile all this info into a nice doc for letter writers 1-2 weeks before the deadline. At the top is the submission deadline/link, the middle is the criteria for selection, & at the bottom is all this info not covered in my apps / requiring extra emphasis + some starting language. I cannot recommend this enough. It helps you have some more control over your narrative. It forces the review panels to see your excellence is multifaceted. And it also helps your letter writers see that excellence is spelled out a bit more, and write the letter with ease.

I'd like to thank @fjdollar for this advice years ago. It changed my life, and I'd like to think my letter writers also thank me for putting in this work to make it as easy as possible for them to speak about my amazingness.