Effective recommendation letters are written by persons who meet some of the following criteria:

- Is aware of your field of interest and the schools you are applying to.
- Is able to evaluate your performance in your field of interest.
- Is able to discuss your personal characteristics.
- Is able to discuss your capacity to work with others.
- Can discuss your leadership skills.
- Can evaluate your level of professionalism (e.g., punctuality, efficiency, assertiveness).
- Can discuss your academic skills -- not simply experience, but evaluate your potential to succeed in graduate-level study.
- Evaluates you positively relative to others.
- Has some recognition and whose judgment is highly valued within the field.
- Is able to write a good reference letter (i.e., eloquent).

And, keep in mind:

- **Use the Application Materials to Help You Choose Letter Writers.**
  Application materials are your best ally in helping you choose the right letter writers. Some applications, for instance, encourage you to choose individuals who can speak to your teaching ability or character rather than those with the highest stature. Take this advice seriously.

- **Seek a Mix of Letter Writers, and Identify Their Roles for Them.**
  Collectively, your letters should reflect a balanced picture of you. A Truman Scholarship winner from a few years ago obtained support letters from the following: a university program coordinator, an assistant professor of political science, and a Red Cross volunteer. If the person recommending you is expected to comment from a certain angle, be sure he or she knows this.

- **Choose People Who Know You Well and Help Them to Know You Better.**
  Avoid abruptly asking someone for a recommendation letter after class, in the hallway, or via e-mail. Instead, make an appointment with the individual to discuss whatever you are applying for and how he or she can help you. If possible, give the letter writer any materials that might help him or her write a more detailed letter, such as your resume or a draft of an application essay that you prepared.

- **Respect a "No".**
  If someone you ask for a letter seems to be saying "no" to you, seek someone else. The person may be inappropriate, too busy, or may not know you well enough to write you a good letter.