Tips for Letters of Recommendation

CollegeBoard

FOR STUDENTS

Whether it is required for a college application or a scholarship opportunity, a letter of recommendation plays a crucial role in painting the complete picture of YOU. While grades, entrance exam results, and extracurricular activities all describe the type of student you are, the letter showcases your accomplishments, personal attributes, and skills.

WHEN TO ASK

- The earlier you ask, the better!
- One month before your earliest application deadline, especially when asking a teacher or counselor who might be writing many letters of recommendation.
- Early decision applications might require a recommendation at the start of your senior year.

WHOM TO ASK

- Often colleges request letters of recommendation from a teacher, your school counselor, or both. If you're considering a specific major, you might consider getting a recommendation from a teacher of a related subject.
- A counselor's recommendation broadly showcases the student's potential, while a teacher's recommendation provides a more specific focus on academic performance.
- If it can be any teacher, core subject teachers, such as your English, math, science, or social studies teachers, make good candidates.
- In some cases additional recommendations may come from a coach, work supervisor, or community member, but be sure to follow the specific guidelines provided by the college regarding letters of recommendation.
- It is recommended to ask a teacher from your junior year or a current teacher if they have known you long enough to form an opinion.
- It is best not to go back too far, as colleges want current perspectives on their potential candidates.
- A teacher who can speak to your potential outside the classroom as well is a great bonus!

HOW TO ASK

- Ask in a way that allows a teacher to decline comfortably if he or she does not have time to do a good job.
- For example: "Do you feel you know me well enough, and have enough time, to write a letter of recommendation for me?"
- On the application form, waive your right to view recommendation letters. This gives more credibility to the recommendations in the eyes of the college.

HOW TO HELP

- Advise teachers and counselors of appropriate deadlines, especially noting any early deadline dates.
- Take some time to speak with them, even if they know you well.
- Make it easy for them to give positive, detailed information about your achievements and your potential by providing them with a résumé or a "brag sheet" to reference.
- Follow up with your recommendation writers a week or so prior to your first deadline to see if they need more information before they mail their letters.
- Answer some of the questions below to provide your recommenders with the information they need to write the best letters for you.

Helpful Questions to Answer for Recommendation Writers:

1. What two adjectives best describe you? Give one example of why one of those words came to mind.
2. Are there any special circumstances, living situations, or relevant family aspects that have had a significant impact on your personal or academic life?
3. What do you consider some of your greatest strengths and how did you come to realize them?
4. What extracurricular activities have you been involved in? What achievements have you accomplished? Describe the ones that are most meaningful to you.
5. Why is a college education important to you? What are some of your long-term academic goals and what do you intend to study?
6. Have you had any experience in a leadership position? If so, what did you learn from the experience?
7. Have you served your community or had any volunteer experience? If so, which of these was the most memorable or meaningful and why?
8. Are there any challenges you have faced and overcome that you would want someone to know? Be sure to include what you learned from the experience.

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FOR TEACHERS

Colleges rely on students' high school teachers to provide recommendations on academic performance and potential. A strong teacher recommendation can bring a student's application to life for the admission committee and may be the decisive factor for some students.

EFFECTIVE LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Provide context. The beginning of the letter explains how the person knows the student and is an opportunity for teachers to provide information on the courses taken with them.

Are specific and storied. The use of adjectives to describe the student should be accompanied with anecdotal detail.
"David is an extremely kind and sensitive boy. He frequently works with other students who are falling behind and tutors students during his off-campus period."

Cite examples of academic performance. Sharing descriptions of a student's piece of work strengthens statements about a student's academic abilities.
"Although not a requirement for my class, Mary entered the science fair and her project demonstrated a high level of understanding of multiple complex varieties of plant and animal life. Her clear and succinct explanation impressed the judges."

Highlight other noteworthy characteristics. Examples of a student's personal qualities will provide insight about her or his additional attributes that will lead to success in college.
"David always takes the initiative to look for answers before asking for help," and *"Susan processes constructive criticism well; she is always willing to go the extra mile in order to take her work to the highest level of formal and conceptual refinement."*

HELPFUL PREPARATION

Requesting information: Ask the student to provide a résumé or "brag sheet," reflections on the class, specific class accomplishments, and details of all deadlines for the forms.

Talking to the student: A conversation about the student's class experiences, colleges of interest, future plans, etc., can help frame the letter more clearly.

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FOR COUNSELORS

A strong letter of recommendation from a counselor can be—and often is—the differentiator that will get a student a closer look in the admission process. Both the students and the admission teams truly appreciate it.

SUGGESTIONS

Gather information: Develop a way of obtaining information from your students through questionnaires, one-on-one meetings, or other techniques.

Personalize: Use the information to write an individualized and accurate letter. It should provide a picture of the student that cannot be found in any other part of the application.

Contextualize: Place the student in the context of their class or the school. Help the college understand your caseload and how well you know the student. Explain any unusual circumstances that may have affected the student's performance (within your rights given confidentiality constraints).

Share key attributes: Address attitude/character as well as academic ability. Relate observed characteristics such as leadership, passion, interests, and special talents.

Provide examples: Support your points with stories and details that highlight the student. Address growth if you have known the student over a significant period of time.

Stay honest: Be candid and comprehensive and include negatives if you are comfortable doing so.

Contribute to campus: Describe why you feel the student is a good fit for the campus and how the student can add to the community based on what you know about the college and its students.

Stick to one page: A specific, short letter is preferable to a general, long one.

Send it in: Share your letter with the college along with other forms like the counselor evaluation form. If you're sending a copy of a letter, be sure it is a clear photocopy. Keep a copy for yourself and don't hesitate to call the college if there is additional information you'd prefer to relay via phone.

THINGS TO AVOID

- Listing information that's available on the application
- Paraphrasing others who are writing recommendations
- Using the same language for multiple student recommendations
- Commenting on the student's appearance
- Having typos and grammatical mistakes
- Assuming that high grades are sufficient for selective colleges to admit a student
- Underestimating the impact a compelling letter can have on a student's application