

Writing Letters of Recommendation for College Applications

(In creating this document, we have used liberally the words and ideas of many unmentioned professionals.)

Seniors will soon be approaching you with requests for letters of recommendation to send to colleges. Even if you're an old hand at writing recs, please pay attention to the suggestions below so that you can write the best recs ever! The colleges tell us that a strong rec can influence their decisions greatly. So realize that you play a significant role in the application process. We appreciate the time, thought, and effort that you devote to your composition.

Application Enclosures

We send two teacher recs plus the college counselor's rec with every application package. In addition, each package includes

- a. the student's forms and essay(s)
- b. standardized test scores
- c. transcript and secondary school report
- d. the School Profile.

Deadline Information

The college office deadline for application materials is a month in advance of the deadline for the college admission office. We are trying to prevent last-minute hassles that often lead to errors. Our first hard deadlines will be October 15; then there will be a deluge of November 1 and 15, December 1 and January 1 deadlines. We need your help as we try to perform our job efficiently and effectively for the students' benefit. Submitting your recommendations to us at least two weeks prior to the college's deadline will be very, very helpful. We will be very, very grateful! Once you have written a recommendation for a student, it will be used for each that student's applications; you should not make the rec school-specific unless there is a particular purpose in doing so. Of course, a few schools do provide their own teacher recommendation forms, which you must use.

Directions to Students from College Office

We mention these guidelines to students before they approach you.

1. At least two weeks in advance of the deadline in the counseling office, take the request form to the teachers you are asking to write recommendations.
2. Politely ask the teachers if they feel comfortable in writing a recommendation for you. If a teacher suggests that someone else could write a better recommendation for you, thank him or her and revise your plan. Be sure to let Ms. Louis know.
3. Thank teachers who do write your recommendations.

Suggestions for Writing Recommendations

1. If the student has not asked you in timely fashion and/ or if he is not polite, please remind him/ her of those obligations. Ideally, the student should inform you of the application deadline as a reminder.
2. If you are uncomfortable composing a recommendation for a particular student, feel free to say so. Each student should know that the recommendations in his/ her packet speak to his strengths as much as possible. There is no reason for you to suffer through an effort to write positively about a student for whom you have few positives to share!
3. Please complete the recommendations at your earliest convenience. **We do need these two weeks or so prior to the college deadlines** because there are so many applications to process and so many materials to be compiled for each application. Thanks for your help in this matter.
4. Remember that you are writing the recommendation as a teacher of a specific subject. **Focus on what goes on "inside the walls of the classroom."** Avoid global references, which are covered in the counselor rec. Of course, if you have contact with the student in another context and that opportunity provides valuable insight, by all means, include this information.

Guidelines for Writing Recommendations

College admissions officers offer a substantial amount of insight and advice regarding teacher recommendations, which are quite important. **One admissions officer has noted, “Recommendations are the mortar that hold an application together.”** Please use the following information to help you create a strong rec., keeping in mind that some points will apply more to certain students and that you should not feel compelled to try to meet every single one of these tips. This list is intended to aid, not discourage or overwhelm you.

1. Make a genuine case for a candidate. State your opinion of the student’s strengths and limitations, describe his/ her character, and provide examples of his/ her accomplishments (beyond GPA, etc., in your class). Don’t hesitate to say something negative, particularly if a student’s difficulty has been overcome. Find a way to distinguish the unique qualities of the student. A thoughtful, detailed letter can make a qualified student stand out.

2. Provide information about extenuating circumstances, if any, that have had an impact on the student’s performance. Make sure the information is pertinent, timely and clearly stated.

3. In your descriptive response, indicate the year and course in which you taught the student. Tell how he handled himself in your class, what motivates and excites him. **Describe his commitment, curiosity, independence, initiative, ability to learn, etc.** Include his willingness to seek extra help, do extra work, revise papers, and go beyond the assignment. Describe his characteristics, habits, etc. Show how a student contributes to the classroom. How does the student perform in regard to discussions/ lectures/ research papers/ independent assignments, etc? Mention what/ how you have taught in the course. What skills have been taught? What are your expectations? The highly competitive schools particularly value this kind of information.

4. Focus on the student’s most distinguishing academic and intellectual qualities and, as much as possible, his most distinguishing qualities of character and personality, particularly as they relate to academic issues, and provide specific examples. Convey some sense of the student’s mind - imagination, intellectual zeal, and contributions to the intellectual climate of the school - in comparison to other students you have taught. For a student whose work is average or below, focus on energy, eagerness, growth. Please avoid generalities; instead, provide specific support.

5. “Make your recommendations rattle and clink with ‘telling detail’; one vivid example or image (‘she has the work ethic of an Alaskan sled dog’) will stay with your reader and have greater impact than even a well-crafted but general paragraph.” The following excerpt from Karen’s ’02 rec for Mary Robinson exemplifies this guideline:

"Mary does not work for a grade; she works to understand. A student who works only for a grade would not be able to tell me exactly how my hand-powered flashlight works when I saw her at the prefect/proctor retreat before the start of school this year. I had my clear plastic flashlight and thought she might find it neat. She took it and pumped the handle a few times, watched a metal piece spin around inside, saw some copper coils, and then said, 'This must be a magnet, and when the magnet moves around near the coils, the magnetic field changes through the coils, and if the magnetic field is changing, a changing electric field is produced, and that will cause a current in the wire, which lights the bulb.' I have had many bright students who could solve problems relating to Faraday's Law when we studied that material back in February, but I have had precious few (none that I can recall right now) who could apply it to a practical device some eight months later."

6. If you have a story to tell about a student, tell it. **A good anecdote is far more effective than even the most carefully chosen list of adjectives.**

7. A recommendation should be quite readable. If this means lengthening it by adding details, that is fine. **Make the length suit the content.**

8. **If appropriate, predict the student's impact on the college classroom and campus environment.**

9. Use any superlative that you honestly can and support it with a specific example. **Eliminate routine praise, vague generalizations, and a laundry list of non-specific, affirmative adjectives.**

Beware clichés. Don't overuse the same words. *Tremendous, outstanding, dedicated, hardworking, unique* and *determined* are good descriptive words but lose their effectiveness when used repeatedly and without specific support. Similarly, avoid general, non-distinguishing traits such as *conscientiousness, promptness, or diligence*.

10. **Remember the importance of your first and concluding sentences / paragraphs.** Your first sentence should get the reader's attention; the last should effectively summarize your recommendation. Avoid depending on the same general, evaluating statements for different students.

11. Information about a student's appearance is not important unless it has a bearing on achievement, obstacles overcome, etc.

Admissions counselors read literally thousands of applications. You can ease their job a bit -- and strengthen our students' chances -- by writing the best recommendations possible: Establish a tone and retain it. Find a "hook" to help the reader remember the student. **We ask you to type your descriptive response; typed responses look more professional. Proofread! No typos or grammatical or spelling errors, please!!!**

Questions? Concerns? Looking for further examples? We'll try to help. And many, many thanks for your ongoing assistance and support of our efforts in addition to your own strong teaching, coaching, advising, and parenting.