

Getting Strong Recommendation Letters

Letters of recommendation are a critical component of your college application. They're written by teachers and guidance counselors, describing your strengths as a student and how they believe you'll fare in a university setting (Kane, 2014).

In addition to your essays, letters of recommendation are the only other part of the application that includes qualitative information that sheds light on who you are as a person – well beyond the quantitative information depicted by your grades and test scores (Module One: The Value of LOR). Given their importance, you should approach letters of recommendation as thoughtfully as you're approaching the rest of your college application. Follow these tips to get the best results:

Understand what's required

Selective schools will require two teacher recommendations and one from your college counselor. While the schools you end up applying to may not require that many, it's wise to prepare for that scenario so you're not scrambling at the last minute if you end up adding an additional, more selective school to your list. Start thinking now about which teachers you'd like to ask, and plan for several back ups in case needed (see below).

Choose carefully

The two teachers who write your recommendation letters will ideally be from your junior year, because they can speak to recent experience but also had you in their class for a full year (Farrington, 2015). When you're choosing who to ask, look beyond the grades you earned from each teacher. Instead, think about classes where you demonstrated leadership, took on extra responsibility, or even struggled and overcame obstacles (The Princeton Review, 2016). Each of these situations give the teacher something interesting to write about in their letter, and each speak to skills the college admissions committee will be interested to read about.



Ask early

Teachers are already busy, and each will likely be asked to write multiple letters of recommendation for other students. Do them the courtesy of asking for their help early – at least a month before the letter is due, and ideally allowing them the entire summer before your senior year to get it done (Merrill, 2010). Not only will this help them manage the extra workload; it'll help you by improving the odds that they will have the time and mental space to write you a thoughtful recommendation. This is especially important if you're requesting support from a very popular teacher who might put a cap on the number of letters they agree to write each year.

Provide guidance

When you approach teachers to write recommendation letters for you, provide them with some content ideas. Share with them why you chose them, remind them of how you contributed to their class in a unique way, and include any other details about your life you think are important for them to know. (The College Board, 2016). Remember: each teacher will likely write dozens of recommendation letters and you're giving them extra work to do, so you owe it to them to make this task as easy as possible. Plus, you're influencing the potential direction of their remarks about you, which will likely result in a letter that more closely aligns with what you'd want it to say.

Know what to leave out

While advice on this is mixed, I recommend you don't provide teachers with details that will appear elsewhere on your college application – your grades, test scores, activities list, etc. While this information does help the teacher better understand your accomplishments, it creates the temptation for them to reference that information in their letter, which doesn't add anything that the admissions committee can't find elsewhere in your application. (Simmons, 2014) Instead, stick to the narrative guidance outlined above, focusing on the additional information your teacher can share to round out the details covered in the rest of your application.

Be organized

Make this task as easy on your teacher as possible by providing a (typed, not hand written) cover sheet that recaps the important logistical information associated with the recommendation letter (Shaevitz, 2013), including due dates and any other pertinent information. Take accountability for checking in with your teacher a week or two in advance of the letter submission deadline to ensure they're on track to mail the letter on time.

Go the extra mile

When you make the request of your teacher, provide them a pre-addressed, postage-paid envelope they can use to send their letter once they're ready. Finally, suggest they address the letter to the Director of Admissions, and provide all the information they'll need to easily do so (Farrington, 2015). These extra touches demonstrate to your teacher that you value their time and are trying to make this extra task as seamless for them to execute as possible.

Show gratitude

Teachers are signing up for extra work when they agree to write you a recommendation letter. It should go without saying that you should request this from them as if they're doing you a favor – because they are! Don't take for granted that they'll be willing to do it, and express your sincere gratitude when they agree to (Module One: Tips for Getting Strong LOR). A nominal token of appreciation, like a coffee gift card or a small treat, can go a long way to express your appreciation without seeming like you're trying to "buy" a positive letter.

Understand if the answer is "no"

A teacher may decline to write a recommendation letter for you, for any variety of reasons. They may have already agreed to write as many letters as they're able to commit to, they may not feel they know you well enough, or they may not feel they can write you a fully supportive letter. It can be hard not to take it personally if one of your chosen teachers tells you no, but choose to take it in stride. Be sure to thank them for their consideration and plan ahead by having several additional teachers in mind as back up in case you need them. This is yet another reason it makes sense to ask teachers early.

Don't forget your counselor!

Most selective schools will require a letter of recommendation from your school's college or guidance counselor, in addition to the two teacher letters. While it may be true that writing recommendation letters is more a part of the college counselor's job description than it is for a teacher, that doesn't mean you should take your counselor's efforts for granted. They're still doing something generous for you, and the broader context their letter sets is unique from that of your teachers and can significantly affect your overall application (Kane, 2014). Be sure to apply many of the same tips above when interacting with your counselor – be proactive, grateful, and organized.

Works Cited

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