

Writing Strong Recommendation Letters

Letters of recommendation are a critical component of your students' college applications. Written by teachers like you as well as by guidance counselors, their purpose is to describe your students' strengths and how you believe they'll fare in a university setting (Kane, 2014).

Letters of recommendation are critically important for your students because they're one of the only parts of their application that includes qualitative information that sheds light on who the student is as a person – going well beyond the quantitative information depicted by their grades and test scores (Module One: The Value of LOR).

Given their importance, you should approach writing letters of recommendation for your students thoughtfully. Follow these tips to get the best results:

DO: *Take it as a compliment*

Your student is asking you to write them recommendation letter because you and/or your class stands out to them when they reflect on their high school career. Maybe they took on extra responsibility in your class, demonstrated leadership, or even struggled and overcame obstacles with your help (The Princeton Review, 2016). Take their request as a compliment and enjoy this positive feedback. A lot about being a teacher is hard, but this is a moment when you can see evidence of the impact you've had on some students.

DON'T: *Feel like you have to say yes*

While you should feel flattered to be asked, you may choose to decline to write a recommendation letter for a student for any variety of reasons. You may have already agreed to write as many letters as you're able to commit to, you may not feel you know the student well enough, they may not have asked far enough in advance, or you may not feel you can write a fully supportive letter. When you say no to a student, be sure to thank them for asking and explain why you can't help them at this time.

DO: *Require advance notice*

You're already extremely busy, and you'll likely be asked to write multiple letters of recommendation for other students. Make it a personal requirement that students request letters from you at least a month before they're due, and ideally before the end of the school year so you can work on them over the summer. (Merrill, 2010). Not only will this help you manage the extra workload; it'll ensure you have the time and mental space to write a thoughtful recommendation.



DON'T: *Sign up for more than you can do well*

Some teachers have a strong relationship with a large number of students and may find themselves being asked to write a lot of recommendation letters... and genuinely wanting to say yes to most, if not all, of the requests. While your intentions may be good, resist the urge to agree to more letters than you can feasibly do – and do well. It may take some trial and error over several years to know what that threshold is for you, and it might differ from that of other teachers for a variety of reasons. Pay attention to how long it takes you to write letters of recommendation, and how difficult it is to manage with your other responsibilities. Use that to inform how many you'll ideally agree to take on, and stick to it.

DO: *Ask for appropriate preparation*

Require students to provide you with a written summary of what they hope you'll highlight. Ask them to share with you why they chose you for this task, a reminder of how they contributed to your class in a unique way, and any other details about their life that they think are important for you to know. (The College Board, 2016). Remember: you're taking on extra work, so your students owe it to you to make this task as easy as possible. Feel free to remind your students that, while you'll maintain editorial control of the final product, the information they provide you can influence the potential direction of your remarks about them, resulting in a letter that more closely aligns with what they'd want you to say.

DON'T: *Be redundant*

As part of the materials they provide you, your students may share details like their grades, test scores, and list of activities. While it can be tempting to incorporate these things into your recommendation letter to round out its contents, try to avoid that temptation. The admissions committee can get those details about your student from the other materials they'll submit.

DO: *Convey humanity*

Instead of replicating details the admissions committee will find elsewhere in the student's application, use your comments in the recommendation letter to focus on bringing out the humanity in your student (Simmons, 2014). Think about what you can share about the student that the admissions committee likely wouldn't know if you didn't convey it – any special circumstances in their lives or unique challenges they've overcome.

DON'T: *Leave out context*

Before diving into all of the great content you want to share about your student, be sure to ground the admissions committee in the context of how you know and have interacted with the student (Sackstein, 2015). What class did you teach them in? Have you had any other interactions, such as being their coach, mentor, or knowing them in the community as a volunteer, etc.? Paint a picture for those who read your letter about how you've engaged with this student.

DO: *Push for organization*

Beyond your student preparing you thoroughly to write the contents of the recommendation letter, you should also require for them to be organized in managing the overall process. That means asking them to provide you a typed cover letter that conveys all key deadlines and any requirements, like who you should address the letter to, the actual address to which you should send it, etc (Shaevitz, 2013). That also means asking that they check in with you and provide reminders about deadlines – rather than them relying on you to provide updates on the status. This is a great chance for them to take ownership and accountability and to make your life easier when you're taking on extra work to help them.

DON'T: *Neglect to connect the past to the future*

By nature, the things you'll share in the letter of recommendation will speak to what your student has done in the past. But, the admissions committee is reading your content to look for clues about what the student will do in the *future*. So, help them draw those conclusions yourself. Finish your letter by talking about how you believe the skills your student has demonstrated to date will show up in the future, and how you believe they'll contribute to their future university.

Works Cited

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