



The Art of Asking for Letters of Recommendation

Your transcript is generally the first part of your application reviewed by college admissions officers, and your grades and the courses in which you've earned them will be scrutinized closely. Yet don't underestimate the impact of letters of recommendation, and don't believe skeptics who assume since they all praise the candidates, they must be indistinguishable from one another.

A good letter of recommendation gives admissions officers a sense of who you are as a flesh and blood person and what sort of member of their college community you will be. The student with the strongest academic record will be admitted to the most selective schools only if the recommendations are as outstanding as the transcript. And the student with a comparatively weak transcript or test scores will end up with many more options if the letters of recommendation speak of strengths that are not reflected in the numbers.

Every college you apply to will receive at least one "School Letter" written by your school counselor, and many will require an additional letter or two from classroom teachers. Many applicants also obtain letters of recommendation from coaches, music or art teachers, employers, and the like. Some few colleges, mostly small ones, welcome and read as many letters as an applicant provides. Most, though, recommend that you send no more than one additional letter beyond the number that they request.

So think carefully about whom you will ask, and make sure that each letter reflects a different sphere of your life. If you need two teacher letters, they should reflect your performance in subjects as different from one another as possible, for example one from a humanities subject and the other from a math or science. You need not have earned top grades in these teachers' classes because all admissions officers will tell you that some of the best letters come from teachers who write about a student's effort and achievement in a subject that did not come naturally to him or her.

So how do you ensure that your counselor and teachers will write you really strong letters? Obviously, the better they know you, the easier it will be for them to write on your behalf, but even if they know you well, you shouldn't hesitate to do your part to help. Both counselors and teachers often ask students to complete a questionnaire before they write the recommendation. Think carefully to ensure that the information you provide on these questionnaires is substantive and specific enough that they can use it in a meaningful way. Recommendation letters are most persuasive when they contain supporting details as evidence of the traits they ascribe to you.

When it comes to obtaining teacher recommendations, begin by asking very nicely (in person if possible, via email only as a last resort) if they'd be willing to do this for you, thanking them in advance, and telling them you'd like to give them some information you think they might find helpful. Then, consider what information you'd like included in their letters, and write it down. Think about what the recommender might not know, like what specific units or projects you really enjoyed or felt were particularly good learning experiences for you. Try to explain the reasons you enjoyed the course and projects that excited you the most. Tell the recommender if you are particularly proud of an achievement because it was a first for you or because it came after great effort. You don't need to remind the recommender that you received an "A" for a particular assignment, but tell him or her if you felt proud that you figured out something by yourself or if you became a regular participant in class discussions for the first time in your life.

When asking for letters of recommendation from employers or other people who have worked with you outside of school, be gracious and ask (in person if at all possible) if they would be willing to write a letter for you before you give them the email addresses or stamped, addressed envelopes for the colleges - or if your school's Naviance is linked to the Common Application and programmed to accept letters from outside recommenders, invite them to submit their recommendation there.

In any case, all letters should be sent directly to the colleges, not to you first, and you should waive the right to see them if you want them to be taken seriously. Give your recommenders plenty of time to write the letters before your application deadlines. In most cases you will probably want to ask everyone but the school counselor no later than September of your senior year. Counselors often begin writing these letters over the summer, so you'll need to get the information to them before the end of your junior year.