

ATTENTION TEACHERS!

DO'S AND DON'TS FOR WRITING GREAT LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Writing great letters of recommendation is hard work! Knowing you all want to write the best letters possible, this memo puts together a resource list for you to help develop strong letters of recommendation and avoid the most common mistakes that admissions officers see in ineffective letters.

Are Letters Important?

You bet they are! Grades and test scores are important, but it is your candid appraisal of how a student behaves in the classroom and your knowledge of them as individuals that brings an application to life. If you want to know more, see the references for a video and an article describing the importance of these letters.

But not just any letters – they have to be personalized to the student with as much detail as possible to be of benefit to the college, who wants to know whether your student is a good fit for their college. How to convey that information? Here are some Do's and Don'ts to consider.

DO:

- **Let students know in spring** what you need to write a great letter of recommendation. Explain how many letters you write a year, and that it takes time to write a thoughtful letter.
- **Hand out the “14 Tips for Getting Strong Letters of Recommendation.”** This spells out the information each student should provide you so you can write the best letter possible.
- **Address your letter to the Director of Admissions, by name if possible.** Motivated students should provide you with that information.
- **Explain how you know the student, and for how long.** Colleges consider letters from teachers who have known students in capacities other than in class – such as through coaching or community service activities – particularly valuable.
- **Include lots of colorful examples.** Stories bring an applicant to life. Between two otherwise equal applicants, personal observations and anecdotes may make the difference between being accepted or rejected.
- **Be specific.** Colleges get thousands of “outstanding” applicants. What makes *your* student an outstanding candidate for that college?
- **Give your contact information.** Some colleges appreciate the chance to call you for follow-up information.
- **Read the additional references at the end.** Check out the samples of good and bad letters to inspire you with some ideas of your own.

DON'T:

- **Repeat information that appears elsewhere in the application.** “One of my top three English students this year” carries more weight than “she got a 750 on English Reading.”
- **Write a letter if you don't think you are the best teacher for the job.** If you are the English teacher and the student is applying to engineering school, suggest that a math or science teacher's recommendation may carry more weight. Explain to the student that you feel there might be another teacher better suited to write the recommendation, and suggest which teacher if possible.
- **Write a weak letter.** Weak letters often focus on the strength of the school, or the student body, without providing enough detail about the student.
- **Write a formulaic “template” letter.** Colleges read thousands of letters a year, and can easily spot a form letter. Especially when it is the same letter written for two different students applying to the same college. If you don't have the time or enthusiasm to write a good letter, consider letting another teacher write one instead.
- **Write the same letter for international schools as you would for US colleges.** Some information important to US applications, like community service or extracurricular activities, do not help international applications. Have the student do the research for you on what each college expects in their letter of recommendation.
- **Miss deadlines.** While some colleges are forgiving about late letters of recommendation, many are not, and that student's opportunity could be lost if a letter is not submitted on time.

For More Information:

Check out these useful articles and a video interview with college admissions officers.

- College Admissions. (2014). *Requesting letters of recommendation*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDGVAYx-xQ>
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- Purdue Writing Lab. (2016, January 25). Tips for Educators and Guidance Counselors. Retrieved October 14, 2018, from https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/teacher_and_tutor_resources/writing_letters_of_recommendation_for_students/tips_for_educators_and_guidance_counselors.html
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- Simmons, A. (2014, February 24). The Art of the College Recommendation Letter. Retrieved October 14, 2018, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/02/the-art-of-the-college-recommendation-letter/284019/>