

ATTENTION COLLEGE-BOUND JUNIORS!

14 Tips for Getting Strong Letters of Recommendation

It's spring, and college applications are months away. Although you may not have taken the ACT/SAT or even know exactly where you want to apply, now is the time to take the first critical step in applying to college: asking your teachers for the all-important letters of recommendations. Here's how to get great college recommendations from your teachers.

Why are Letters So Important?

Your teacher recommendations give colleges a chance to see your qualities as a student that you can't capture in grades and test scores. Are you the first student to help others? The one who holds down a job and still manages a 4.0? Colleges want to know that about you. The teacher letters of recommendation bring your application to life, and help colleges know whether you are a good fit and will thrive at their institution. The more important the fit – and the more selective the college – the more important the letters become in conveying your unique qualities. That's why nearly all colleges require them.

Tips for Securing the Strongest Letters of Recommendation

- 1. Determine what letters your prospective colleges require.** Check the websites of your prospective colleges. Make a list of which letters each college requires, from whom, and by when.
- 2. Find the right person to ask.** By the time your letter is written, your teacher will have had a full junior year to observe you in class and gather examples of your work. You will have had a chance to let the teacher get to know you better as well. If this is a teacher you have had for several years, even better; recent observations from junior year typically carry more weight than a letter from a favorite teacher from prior years. Teachers who work with you in more than one capacity – as a coach or drama teacher or in community service, for example – have even more insight to provide. And don't limit your requests to teachers who gave you an A, if there is one specific teacher who knows how hard you worked to get that B and came in three times a week at lunch for extra help. To colleges, that shows the initiative they want to see students need to succeed in college.
- 3. Ask a teacher with a background compatible with your future study interests.** If you plan to be an engineer, try asking a math or science teacher for a recommendation. If you are applying to study music, ask your liberal arts teachers. Remind them of specific examples of your academic strengths and your contributions to their classes. Provide the teacher with copies of work you did for him or her, or work you are particularly proud of.
- 4. Avoiding poor recommendations.** A good writer of recommendations will sometimes turn down a student's request for a letter of recommendation. It's usually because for whatever reason, that teacher does not feel he or she has the time or information to write you a strongly supportive letter of recommendation. If that happens, THANK the teacher, because they just saved you a bad letter of recommendation and gave you the opportunity to ask someone better suited for the job. (And you might ask the teacher for recommendations, as teachers talk among themselves and know which teachers know certain students in more depth than others.)
- 5. Ask early.** Your teacher may have 20 or more letters to write, and your asking early gives that teacher extra time to develop a quality letter – maybe even over summer break -- instead of a rushed effort at the last minute.

6. **Ask politely.** Writing letters is not part of a teacher's job, as some students think, and definitely do not have the attitude of entitlement that conveys you think it is their job to write a letter for you. It is a big commitment of time for them, so ask politely, and in private. Make an appointment to speak with them privately and come prepared with your materials. Tell the teacher specifically why you are asking him or her to write your letter, citing how much you learned from working on a certain paper or project or whatever detail is relevant.
7. **Provide details.** Writing good letters is hard work. Make their job easier by providing them with an electronic file (so they can cut and paste information) with much background information as possible, including a list of your high school and extracurricular activities, your college essays (if you have them), a list of colleges you are thinking of applying to, and of course stamped and addressed envelopes (unless the teacher submits the letter online). Bonus points: provide your teachers with the name of the Director of Admissions to each college to which you are applying so they can personalize the letter to that college.
8. **Give anecdotes.** Colleges love examples that convey who you are, and teachers will put those anecdotes to good use. Include a list of specific examples of accomplishments achieved, obstacles overcome, and classroom success stories for your teachers to craft an engaging letter.
9. **Spell out the bad news.** Did you get arrested in high school? Suffer your parents' divorce and have it reflected in your grades? Adverse information does not necessarily work against you, if you can show in an essay about an obstacle you overcame, or a mistake you made and what you learned from it. If it's a story better told by a teacher familiar with the situation, their letter of recommendation may be an opportunity to tell the story in a way that sheds positive light on your circumstances rather than be embarrassed about it or try to hide it.
10. **Don't ask to see the finished letter of recommendation.** If given a choice, choose not to see the letter. Colleges prefer to see letters that you have waived the right to see.
11. **Don't ask for extra letters of recommendation, unless...**there are special circumstances that someone outside of class – perhaps a coach or employer – can convey better. Colleges have thousands of applications to read, and sometimes tens of thousands of letters of recommendation. Many admissions offices will not read any more than the minimum number of required letters.
12. **Send a reminder a week before the letter is due.** Busy teachers will appreciate the reminder of an upcoming deadline.
13. **Keep a great attitude.** Applying for college is stressful. Make the letters of recommendation become a fun part of the process through careful and early planning.
14. **Thank your teacher.** As said, writing a good letter of recommendation is hard work. Be sure to thank your teacher – in a handwritten note -- for all the effort they put in on your behalf. Let them be the first to know where you get accepted and share in your success.

Next Steps

Once you have organized your materials, please feel free to make an appointment to see me. I am happy to review the materials before you present them to your teachers and make suggestions. 775.831.2423 or kkelly@ischools.us.

Want More Information?

Check out these additional videos and articles for more details.

Why letters of recommendation are important:

- Merrill, M. C. (2010). Note to Applicants: Admissions Officers Do Read What Your Teachers Say. <https://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/10/08/teacher-rec/>
- Shaevitz, M. H. (2013, September 20). Letters of Recommendation: The Real Icing on Your College Admissions Cake. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/marjorie-hansen-shaevitz/letters-of-recommendation_1_b_3960620.html

What colleges look for in a letter of recommendation:

- College Admissions. (2014). *Requesting letters of recommendation*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDGVAYx-xQ>

How to ask for a letter of recommendation and what information to include:

- College Board. (n.d.). Getting into College - How to Get a Great Letter of Recommendation. <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/get-in/your-high-school-record/how-to-get-a-great-letter-of-recommendation>
- Safier, R. (2018). How to Ask for a Letter of Recommendation: Complete Guide. <https://blog.prepscholar.com/how-to-request-a-letter-of-recommendation>

Sample letter to a teacher requesting a letter of recommendation:

- Khan Academy. (n.d.). Sample note to provide to recommending teachers. <https://www.khanacademy.org/college-careers-more/college-admissions/applying-to-college/letters-of-recommendation/a/sample-note-to-provide-to-recommending-teachers>

Samples of good letters of recommendation so you can give your teacher enough detail to write a detailed letter about you:

- Safier, R. (2018). 4 Amazing Recommendation Letter Samples for Students. <https://blog.prepscholar.com/4-amazing-recommendation-letter-samples>.