



EssayEdge

How to prepare a

Letter of Recommendation

for college

Table of Content

03.

How to Choose Recommenders for Your College Letters of Recommendation

06.

How to Write a College Recommendation Letter

How to Choose Recommenders for Your College Letters of Recommendation

The reason that colleges ask for letters of recommendation is to help the admissions officers have a better understanding of your ability to excel at their school, both inside and outside of the classroom. They are looking for information that extends beyond what they can learn from your transcripts and test scores. Because of this, when choosing your recommender(s), keep in mind the following tips:

Choosing a Teacher Recommender

Recommendation requirements vary by school. Therefore, even if you're using the Common App, you might need to find more recommenders or recommenders who are not teachers (see tips below). However, most students will only need to ask two teachers for recommendations.

In my experience, the most common pitfall for college applicants regarding recommenders is choosing a teacher where you sailed through their course. Teachers who didn't see you invest much into their class, even though you performed well academically, can't really say anything about your ability to achieve academically in challenging courses.

Their recommendations are typically very generic and would apply to any student who had performed well in their course. The teacher can't comment on your character or how you will do when you face difficulties.

For this reason, choose a teacher who got to know you well, even if you didn't come out of the class with an A. Receiving a recommendation from a teacher who can describe you overcoming obstacles, accepting feedback, and having the willingness to take on new challenges will resonate more with the admissions officers and allow them to see you as a promising candidate.

Choosing a Second Teacher Recommender

When deciding which teachers to choose for your recommendations, look for some kind of balance between the two. Otherwise, the recommendations tend to blend together and cancel each other out in the reader's mind. Your recommendations are an opportunity to allow the admissions officers to see a more three-dimensional picture of you. Therefore, instead of simply choosing two classes where you earned As, you might go for one academic and one extracurricular. Or, you could choose one class where you demonstrated excellent organization skills during a big project and another course where you were able to use your emerging leadership skills.



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Selecting a Non-Teacher Recommender

Depending on the school(s) to which you choose to apply, you may be asked specifically for a recommendation from a counselor, volunteer supervisor, or employer. Other schools may simply ask for a recommender who is not a teacher, and you are free to choose whomever you feel would be most helpful to your application. Like the teacher recommendations, remember to view your recommendations as a whole and within the larger context of your entire application package. That may seem like a lot, but schools really do want to get to know you as an individual. Non-teacher recommenders can be fantastic for providing examples of your ability to work as part of a team and attest to your ability to build meaningful relationships not only with your peers but also with a team leader, work supervisor or community organization.

Ultimately, what your recommender chooses to write is up to them. However, when you ask anyone to be a recommender, teacher or no, don't be afraid to have a conversation with that person about why you have asked that person for this favor. Yes, being asked for a recommendation from a student you don't know very well is a chore. On the other hand, being asked for a recommendation from a student with whom you have a genuine connection is flattering and even honor. Just like you wouldn't submit the first draft of your essay, take the time to decide who you would like your recommenders to be and approach the request with sincerity. This is the best way to secure recommendations that will help you shine in the application process.

Make Your Statement of Purpose as Strong as it can Be

You've written a compelling personal statement, your SAT scores are in, and your transcript reflects the years of hard work you've put in to get to this point. Now, you turn to the part of the application that may feel out of your hands: the recommendation letter for college.

It's true that the college reference letter is not written by you; it's generally written by a teacher, counselor, coach, employer, or other individuals who is in a position to assess your capabilities and potential. Nevertheless, as the applicant, it's important to understand what makes a strong recommendation letter.

Furthermore, while this is not encouraged by universities, it is not uncommon for a recommender to ask the student to write a draft of the letter for them – perhaps they are busy, or just want to get a sense of what you would like them to write about you. While it's always better for the letter to be written by the individual who signs it, it is possible that you may find yourself in a position where you need to draft such a letter for yourself, and don't know where to turn. This article from EssayEdge may also be helpful in that case.

The Structure of a College Recommendation Letter

The college recommendation letter should begin with the recommender introducing themselves, and explaining how they know you. This is important to provide context, so the admissions committee understands:

- who this person is to you;
- what their qualifications are in the relevant field;
- and that they know you well enough to accurately evaluate your strengths;

1.

After that brief introduction, the letter should elaborate on specific experiences that the recommender has had with you, which demonstrate your strong suits, skills, character, personality, or any other positive qualities that will make the college know you will be a great fit for their community.

2.

If the letter is written by a teacher, they might choose to discuss specific class assignments that you accomplished to an extraordinary level, or instances when you went above and beyond the requirements of a specific project or opportunity. They might also refer to moments in class when you showed an articulate understanding of the class topic, or when you proved that you were truly passionate about the subject. Beyond academic or athletic achievement, a recommender might also draw from their observations of how you have interacted with your peers, as a way to reflect on your genuine character, kind nature, sense of humor, or other positive personality traits.

3.

It can also be a good idea for the letter to touch on the area of your weaknesses, or areas where you might be able to demonstrate improvement. While it is important the letter come off as ultimately positive and full of praise, it can still add to the objectivity and authority of a letter for it to acknowledge that you are still growing. Nevertheless, whenever bringing up a weakness in this way, it is helpful if the recommender can express optimism about how you will overcome this limitation, drawing from concrete examples of how your character has shown your ability to develop positively as an individual and learn from your mistakes.

4. Finally, a letter of recommendation for college should end with the recommender reiterating your excellent potential, and how they are confident you will be a great addition to the college community. If they like, they might also offer the admissions committee to feel free to contact them if they have any further questions, or need clarification on anything. They will then sign the letter at the bottom, and provide their contact information.

In summary, the broad structure will be:

- recommender introduction
- 2-4 specific stories or experiences they've had with you, reflecting on
- your positive qualities
(optional) 1 weakness, contextualized to show growth potential
- an optimistic prediction of your future success in college and beyond
- signature and contact information



What to Include in a Letter of Recommendation for College

Beyond the structure, it can be useful to understand the purpose and context in order to know how to write a college recommendation letter.

It's important to remember that the admissions officers will already have access to your grades, your standardized test scores, your list of extracurricular activities, and your demographic data. With your personal statement and any additional essays or short answer questions, you have an opportunity to communicate your personal voice, often by telling stories that elaborate upon the bullet points of the numbers and facts from the other parts of your application. As for the recommendation letter, this is where the college can read an objective opinion from a third party, which can illustrate how you are not the only one who thinks you're great!

For this reason, a recommendation letter should detail specific, personal experiences that this recommender has had with you. The reference letter builds upon the foundation of your essays, grades, and test scores, so it can be helpful to refer to specific activities or achievements that might be mentioned briefly elsewhere in the application, and can be verified now by a credible source who knows you well. The more personal, the better – this not only goes for your essays, but for your recommendation letters as well. A letter will go a long way when it is written by someone who clearly knows you beyond the superficial facts of your participation in school. If you have made an impact on them as a teacher or other senior individual, then you will likely make a positive impact on your future peers and professors as well.



How to Approach a Recommender

Especially when you would like to ask a teacher in your junior or senior year of high school to write a letter, it is essential to remember that they may be tasked with writing letters of recommendation for many students. For this reason, it is advisable to ask the individual whether they have the time and are able to write and edit recommendation letter. If they seem hesitant, perhaps they are not the right person to ask. You should not only think of what classes you got the best grades in, but also with whom you might have a relationship that extends beyond the scope of the classroom, even for some small reason. The best letter writers will be the ones who feel like they know you well, even if the class they teach isn't your best subject.

Finally, once they have written the letter for you, express gratitude and thank them for the time they have put in to assist you in this journey to college. After writing the letter, they will be invested in your success, and remember to keep them informed about whether you were admitted, and where you end up deciding to go. Once you're in college, these high school relationships may seem far away, but it's always a great idea to keep in touch with those who have helped you along the way.

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Qinguin C.

Recommendation letter | University of California, Berkeley

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Sho T.

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