

10 tips for recommendation letters



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RECOMMENDATION LETTERS ARE MORE IMPORTANT IN THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROCESS THAN MANY STUDENTS REALIZE. NOW IN MY SEVENTH YEAR ON THE UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, I HAVE LEARNED THAT AMIDST ALL THE INFORMATION ONE CAN GARNER FROM READING A CANDIDATE'S SECONDARY SCHOOL TRANSCRIPT, SHORT RESPONSES, APPLICATION ESSAY, AND LIST OF ACHIEVEMENTS AND ACTIVITIES, WHAT OFTEN ULTIMATELY PULLS THE ENTIRE PICTURE TOGETHER ARE LETTERS FROM COUNSELORS AND TEACHERS. THIS IS BECAUSE, AT THE END OF THE DAY, THE LETTERS PROVIDE EVIDENCE THAT A STUDENT'S ACHIEVEMENTS MAKE AN IMPACT UPON THE OUTSIDE WORLD.

While some students think they have no control over their recommendation letters, students' recommendation etiquette can, in fact, impact the quality of the recommendation they receive. My suggestions to pass along to your students are:

- 1 Give recommenders plenty of time to write your letters. At least two months before your applications are due, make appointments to speak briefly to the people who will be writing your recommendation letters.
- 2 Choose teachers who can vouch for your character, as well as your intellectual abilities.
- 3 Consider choosing teachers who have taught you in subjects you found challenging but nonetheless worked extremely hard in.
- 4 Consider choosing teachers who have taught you in the areas of study you would like to pursue in college.
- 5 Prepare an information sheet to give to recommenders when you want to meet with them with the following information:
 - The schools you are applying to, with descriptions of why you have chosen to apply to each school.
 - Your most meaningful and long-term commitments, with reasons you've chosen these activities.
 - The honors and achievements of which you are most proud, with a description of why they are important in general, and specifically to you.
 - Any personal issues (long commutes, after school jobs, family problems) that may have affected you over your secondary school years.



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- 6 You will likely have little choice regarding who will write the “Counselor” recommendation, but put a good deal of thought behind what teachers will write your “Teacher” recommendations. Thus, choose teachers:
 - with whom you have been able to communicate comfortably;
 - who are not overwhelmed with hundreds of other letters to write;
 - who know you more than as a grade on a paper;
 - who may not have given you your best grade, but who recognize and appreciate your tenacity, hard work, discipline, willingness to take risks, genuine love of learning, collaborative spirit, and so forth;
 - who genuinely like you.
- 7 Show your teachers your true personality.
- 8 Share with teachers relevant aspects of your personal life.
- 9 Share with teachers a paper, project or exam that demonstrates your best work in their class or similar classes.
- 10 Although gifts are not necessary, remember to send thank you notes to recommenders.

My experience in reading international applications, as well as in speaking to many students abroad, has taught me that the American approach to letters of recommendation can be quite different from that of other countries.

GOOD LUCK!



ONLINE RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS APPLYING TO U.S. INSTITUTIONS

The College Board:

www.collegeboard.com

Offers information for students, parents and educators regarding taking standardized tests, planning for college, finding a college, applying to college and paying for college.

The Common Application:

www.commonapp.org

The Common Application is a not-for-profit organization that serves students and member institutions by providing an admission application – online and in print – that students may submit to any of its 346 members.

EducationUSA:

www.educationUSA.state.gov

Guide to U.S. higher education and practical information for living in the United States. The site includes find a school search engines and links to external financial aid resources.

Funding for U.S. Study | International Scholarships:

www.fundingusstudy.org

IIE's free online resource, searchable by field of study, geographic area and nationality, filled with scholarship opportunities for international students seeking to study in the United States.

The Princeton Review:

www.princetonreview.com

Provides rankings, multimedia college campus tours, interactive tools to help students choose a major and admissions expertise. To access information you must be a member, but creating a membership account is free.

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