

Guide to Letter(s) of Recommendation

Letters of recommendations are a core part of your application. They provide an 'objective' assessment of your academic achievements and aptitude and are thought to be an essential part of a university application. If you are far from applying to university make sure that you start to cultivate a relationship with your teacher so they can get to know you better e.g. go to office hours, ask questions, get to know them outside of the classroom, and make sure they get to know you.

1. Find out how many letters of recommendations you need

Figure out exactly how many letters of recommendations you need, what type (e.g. teacher, counselor, other), and the deadlines for submission. If you are applying early you will also need to take that into consideration.

Any other rules regarding recommenders should be noted. This way you make sure to take these rules into consideration when you choose a recommender and communicate them if needed e.g. recommendation should have an official letterhead and signature.

2. Brainstorm a list with your mentor

Start to brainstorm a list of potential recommenders with your Project Access mentor and some other people you trust. This could be family members, school counselors, or other people who have studied abroad.

In an ideal world, you'd ask someone who teaches a core subject, someone who taught you recently, awarded you good grades, and who knows you well and likes you. If you can't have it all then you should prioritize people who:

1. Knows you well and likes you
2. Taught you recently
3. Teaches a core subject

3. Pick your recommenders

When you pick your recommenders, you should ask people who can speak to separate strengths of yours e.g. one from your English Teacher and one from your Math teacher. Consider and talk with your mentor about picking someone outside core academics such as a coach or music teacher, but make sure you focus on getting academic recommendations as your core letters.

4. Asking for recommendations

Make sure to ask your teacher well in advance. We recommend **at least 3 weeks** before the deadline but try to ask about 6 weeks before your first deadline. If you come from a place where teachers are not familiar with recommendations or perhaps writing in English, we advise that you ask 2 months in advance. It gives both you and your teacher time to work on the letter together.

Make sure that you ask in person if possible – if you have already graduated and won't be able to meet them in person, make sure to send a really nice and personal email! Do not group email all of your recommenders – send them each a private and personal email asking them and give

them a reason why you are specifically asking them. If you are still in school, you need to consider when is a good time to ask your teacher. Don't do it right before class, during class, or during short breaks. Instead, try to schedule a brief meeting with them or wait till after class and all the other students have left before you ask if they have 5 minutes to talk.

What do I do if my recommender says no? → Try to gauge why they are saying no. If a teacher seems reluctant it might be because they don't think they can write you a good recommendation based on your academic ability or other. If this is the case, you should thank them for their time and consideration. It could also be because they don't feel confident writing a letter in English or are afraid, they won't be able to write well. Try to figure out if it might just be a discomfort with English or letter writing. We have guides that you can give your teacher! Let them know that you are also available to help.

5. Write thank you notes

Always make sure to follow up after your teacher has agreed to write you a letter – or even if they didn't! Tell them that you really appreciate their time and that you will help in any way they need in order to write the letter. Also, try to provide them with some material they can use to write the letter e.g. a resume, the list of the colleges you are applying to (with links to their websites), the application deadlines, and a paragraph or two about yourself and what you hope to study/dreams. At the bottom of this document we have also provided you with a list of info you can give to your teacher that might help them write the letter.

6. Follow up

Follow up with your recommenders a couple of weeks before the deadline. If you have worked closer with your teacher on the recommendation this might be more intuitive but if you have not it's important to follow up, thank them, and remind them of the deadline.

What do I do if my recommender stops answering me? → Follow up again and remind them of the upcoming deadline and ask if there is something you can help with. This is why it is always important to ask well in advance you so have time to ask someone else if your teacher suddenly becomes unavailable.

7. Submitting the recommendation

Most top US universities use the Common App and it is usually through this application platform you will need to add your recommenders. You will most times need to add their name, email and some other basic info. This will trick an email that will give your recommenders access to upload the recommendation.

You will need to assign recommenders by each individual college you are applying for in the Common App.

8. After your teachers have submitted their recommendations

After your teacher has submitted their recommendations, you will get a notification from the Common App. Most teachers also send you an email. Make sure to email them back where you thank them and let them know that the recommendation has been successfully uploaded. It is also common to follow up after you have received notice of the success of your application – whether it was positive or negative.

Email Template

Below you will find an email template for a follow up with your teachers after they have agreed to write you a letter. You can also amend this template to ask for the letter but we recommend that you try to meet with your teacher in person first.

SUBJECT: Letter of recommendation follow-up (Deadline: Nov. 15)

BODY:

Dear Ms. Smith,

I hope this email finds you well.

First of all, thank you. It means a lot that you're writing me a letter. To make the process smoother, I've included my current resume, as well as the attached questionnaire to remind you of all my accomplishments. Otherwise, here's what you need to know in brief:

I'm applying to the University of Texas, Stanford and USC.

All three schools have a deadline of Nov. 15.

I hope to study mechanical engineering with a minor in philosophy regardless of where I end up, but Stanford is my No. 1 because I'd get to take classes at the d.school to supplement my studies.

My dream job: NASA.

Again, thank you for doing this for me. Please let me know if there's anything else you need, or if you have any follow-up questions. And, if it's okay with you, I'll probably send a check-in email maybe a week or two before the deadline to make sure all is well.

In the meantime, I hope you have a beautiful day!

Sincerely,

Martin Jones

Letter of Recommendation Questionnaire

Here is a list of things you can fill out to help your teacher write your letter. Feel free to add anything or delete items that do not feel useful.

Full legal name:

Preferred name:

Preferred pronouns:

- They/them/theirs
- Ze/hir/hirs
- She/her/hers
- He/him/his
- Other:

Grade:

- 9th
- 10th
- 11th
- 12th
- Other:

Contact Information

- School email:
- Personal email:

College Plans

- Why did you choose me to recommend you?
- Which of your colleges require a recommendation from me?
- What is the earliest application deadline for a college that needs my letter? (Include school and date)
- Which major(s) do you intend to pursue in college, and why? *
- What's your current life dream? Could be your ideal job, ideal environment, etc. Essentially, what/who do you want to be after college? *

Academic Record

- Weighted GPA:
- Unweighted GPA:

Grade in my class:

- Fall semester
 - 90-100
 - 80-89
 - 70-79
 - 69 or below

- In progress
- Spring semester
 - 90-100
 - 80-89
 - 70-79
 - 69 or below
- In progress

Does your academic record (transcript information and test scores) provide an accurate representation of you as a student? Why or why not? (This is also an opportunity for you to discuss an event in your life that has had a significant impact on you, your life, and/or your academics.)

In the Classroom

- How do/did you contribute to the learning and community in my classroom? What is/was your role in the class?
- Which lesson(s) in my class especially intrigued you?
- Of which class project(s) are you most proud? Why?

Personal Profile

- What are 5 words or phrases you would use to describe yourself?
- Do you have a life philosophy? If so, what is it, and why did you adopt it? *

A Teachers Guide to Letter(s) of Recommendation

Dear recommender. We first of all want to thank you for taking the time to help your student with this letter of recommendation. A letter of recommendation is a very important part of a university application and your help is invaluable. Below you will find tips and tricks on how to write a letter of recommendation to US universities. We hope you find it helpful.

Brief overview and function of a letter of recommendation

A letter of recommendation is a core part of a university application. They provide an 'objective' assessment of the students' academic achievements and aptitude and are thought to be an essential part of a university application.

A recommendation letter should first of all describe:

1. the impact this student has had on the classroom
2. the "mind" of the student
3. the student's personality, work ethic and social conduct

If you are a school counselor your letter should focus on:

1. the student's abilities in context, over time — how do they fit within the school's overall demographics, curriculum, test scores?
2. special circumstances beyond the classroom that impact the student

Some examples of a strong letter of recommendation could mention that the student was

1. One of the top few of your career as a teacher or simply a very gifted student
2. Extraordinary performance and impact in the classroom w. examples of their performance
3. Someone who elevates the discussion with unique insight

Main Do's and Don'ts

DO:

1. Tell a story. Admissions offices want to get to know the students through your eyes, what kind of community member they are getting.
2. Pick specific descriptors and back them up with evidence; avoid clichés like "hard-working," "passionate," and "team-player."
3. Show them good student work by adding examples of great essays or work they did in class.

4. Ask permission if you're going to reveal something private about the student (they have a learning disability, their mother has cancer, they struggle with depression).

DON'T:

1. Write your auto bio. The letter should focus on the student.
2. Repeat a student's resume. Admissions offices would rather hear stories about the student than a list of achievements.
3. Make sure you know if the recommendation is a general one or for a specific school. Sometimes the student will ask you to write for several schools so it's important to not add the name of the school unless you know it will go to them specifically.
4. Recycle letters — even if you wrote them in previous years. Admissions counselors might have seen the older ones or ones you wrote for other students and it will hurt the student.

How to structure a letter

Introduction

1. Hook: Start with a simile/metaphor, an absolute statement, a surprising fact, a colorful characterization.
2. The first line should provide the full name of the person that you are recommending.
3. State how long you have known the student and in what context.

Body

1. **Discuss the student's work in your classroom.**
 1. Are they timely, organized, creative, thorough, neat, insightful, unusual?
2. **Describe how the student interacts with peers and adults/learning environment.**
 1. Are they liked? Do they choose to associate with good people? Do they have good people skills?
 2. Do people, especially adults, trust them?
 3. Are they kind/sympathetic/considerate?
 4. Leadership: Do they lead by example or do they take charge? Do they work well in small groups? Participate actively and/or respectfully in whole class discussion? Work well independently? Understand how to break down complex tasks? Suggest modifications to assignments that make them more meaningful? Support weaker students?
3. **Describe the things that you will remember about the student.**
 1. Go beyond diligence and intelligence: Talk about humor, courage, kindness, patience, enthusiasm, curiosity, flexibility, aesthetics, independence, courtesy, stubbornness, creativity, etc.
 2. ALWAYS talk about work ethic if you can.

3. ALWAYS talk about integrity, at least in passing, if you can.
 4. Quirks are GOOD. Individuality is GOOD. It's okay to talk about a student being obsessively into anime, or John Green novels, or Wikipedia. Talk about how they always doodle, always carry a book, play fantasy cricket. It's good to talk about how a student deals with being different — because of their race, their sexual orientation, their religion, their disability. Do not shy away from these things.
 5. Talk about why you will MISS THEM.
4. **Describe how the student reacts to setbacks/challenges/feedback.**
1. Detail any academic obstacles overcome, even if it is partially embarrassing, negative or controversial.
 2. Do they take criticism well? Do they react well to a lower than expected grade? Did they ever deal with a crisis or emergency well?
 3. How do they handle academic challenges? Come to tutoring? Request extra work? If a particular area showed marked improvement over the year, explain what the student did to make it happen.
 4. Do they ask for help when needed? Do they teach themselves? Do they monitor their own learning? Do they apply feedback/learn from mistakes?
5. **Provide evidence and examples of personal qualities.**
1. Physical descriptions can be very useful to make the student memorable e.g. maybe they always wear a hat or walk around with a book.
 2. Think about anecdotes the student has told about their lives, ways they describe themselves, about papers/projects completed, about tutoring patterns, about the time they did something dramatic in class.
 3. Reference significant projects or academic work, especially those that set a new bar for the class.
 4. Identify the student's engagement, level of intellectual vitality, and learning style in your class.
 1. *If you teach English/history:* You should address how well they read. Complex things? Archaic things? Do they see nuance and tone and subtext? You should also address how well they write. Is it organized? Creative? Logical? Intuitive? Functional? Do they have a strong voice? Can they be funny? Formal?.
 2. *If you teach math/science:* You should address how the student analyzes information/handles abstraction. Are they good at categorizing? At visualizing? At explaining? How do they tackle a new topic or strange problem? Think about what their homework/tests LOOK LIKE when you grade them. What does that tell you about how they think?
6. **Include only first-hand knowledge of extracurricular involvement. No lists!**
1. Extracurriculars only matter because they show something about the student — a passion, a skill, a talent. The extracurricular is going away — what will they take with them? What will they bring to campus?
 2. Extracurricular achievements are best used as examples to demonstrate earlier points, not as a goal/paragraph in themselves.

3. If you are a sponsor, think beyond the activity itself — think about reacting to setbacks, supporting team members, organizing events, making suggestions that changed how the team/group did things, setting an example, and growth over time.

Conclusion

1. Begin with an unequivocal statement of recommendation. “[Full Name] carries my strongest recommendation.”
2. State what the student will bring to an institution (NOT why the student deserves acceptance).
3. Summarize the student’s qualities and accomplishments that you wish to emphasize.
4. End with an emotional comment — that you will miss them, that you have learned from them, that you are sorry to see them go, that they are your favorite, etc.

Final tips:

1. Have someone edit/review your letter of recommendation.
2. Let the student know if you have chosen to include any negative or sensitive information so that they remember to address it in their application.
3. Sign the letter — and put it on letterhead if possible.
4. Avoid using ambiguous language and hyperbolic clichés. (All praise should be supported with specific examples.)
5. Ultimately, be specific and detailed. It should be clear that you know and like this student.

Example Letters of Recommendations

EXAMPLE 1

To whom it may concern:

Jordan has a lot on her mind and more on her plate. When I met her, she didn't: she was 14, a freshman in my English class, and absolutely irrepressible. She was game for anything: she made friends with everyone, she joined clubs, and started one when she saw a need. She aced every assignment and always turned in homework that showed careful, thoughtful work. She found a boyfriend, and then found out she was better off without him. She was a firecracker, and clearly among the strongest in her class.

It was clear, then, why she was good with chaos: she lived in a tiny little house with her parents and four sisters, and when a baby brother (finally) appeared during her freshman year, she rolled with that, too: my own son is just a year or so older, and she and I would commiserate about teething and late nights and diapers. From those conversations, I realized that Jordan has the gift and burden of being a practical, sympathetic person —sympathetic enough to be driven to help those in need, and practical enough to see what can be done. So when her mom struggled with a house full of babies and a job, it was always Jordan who put down her homework to go get dinner started or to wipe a snotty nose or to fold a load of laundry. The older girls had their sights on the big world and the younger ones were too little to help—it tended to fall on her.

It was clearly a house with a lot of love and not quite enough resources, and while she had more responsibilities than I wished, I mostly admired how well she handled it.

All that changed spring of her sophomore year when her father died. Being a teacher means watching this happen once every few years. The emotional impact is, of course, brutal, but usually it's relatively simple: the issue is grief, and time does help. But they have six children in the house, 3 not yet in school, and that's not a simple problem. It's a world of responsibility and expense, and it's not something that time can soothe. I cried when I realized she was working part time, because I know how hard she works at school, and I could imagine the grind of her life each day—from the minute she wakes up until she goes to bed, there is an endless need for a pair of hands at home, and then she goes to school to face a brutal academic schedule. Adding a shift at a fast food restaurant before heading home to juggle toddlers and preschoolers and to somehow get her homework done seemed beyond all reason—but the reason was the simple economic need to avoid being a burden on the family, and to help out with some other expenses. I hugged her when she managed to save up enough to quit during AP exams season. I felt like a weight lifted off me—even the sympathy weight was rough—what was the real one like? Of course, she went right back to work when school let out, and when she went back and asked for her job back, they promoted her to shift manager. She spent the summer running a crew of adult full-time fast food workers, and she saved enough to be able to quit for the school year.

I could not do what Jordan does. But she does it. Every damn day. I don't know that it ever occurs to her that she could let anything go-- she passed most of her sophomore AP exams a month after burying her dad, and had an even stronger performance her junior year despite having no time to even think. She never misses an assignment, and I wish they looked more rushed, because I'd feel less guilty about assigning them. Her grades have stayed good—not as good as they would have been, I think, but good—and she's continued to take the most challenging course load we offer, including the marathon AP Physics/AP Chemistry course we call SuperLab. She's heavily involved with YWISE, a STEM research program through the University of Texas at Dallas. More tellingly, she's maintained a social life—she keeps up with her friends, worries about their problems, gossips about boys, and never, ever complains. She still makes it to meeting of the Girl Club she helped found, to dances and to socials. She still indulges in blue or pink hair dye when she can. She's still a vital part of our community.

But she always looks tired to me, and a little underfed, and it breaks my heart every day.

Jordan is my favorite in that group—she was extraordinary before, and the tragedy of her sophomore year has tempered her into steel. I want, so desperately, for her to have a chance to go away, to apply all that strength and creativity and initiative to changing the world instead of to serving customers and wiping snotty noses. Jordan will be fine, regardless—she's proved that these last two years. But we as a society need the kind of person she will grow into if placed into an environment that will point her talents towards targets worthy of them.

She carries my absolute strongest recommendation. I am sure there is some concern that she might have family obligations that will keep her from being able to accept a place in a residential program, but I've discussed logistics with her and her mother and I am confident that the family is prepared to live without her in the immediate household. I do expect she will have to work in the summers. If you have any other questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Amanda Ashmead, Humanities Chair

EXAMPLE 2

To whom it may concern:

Taylor managed to find the one school in America where he'd be the odd man out, and he was as good for us as we were for him. He bridges some very different worlds found in highly selective institutions, and I think he'd be a fabulous resource for any such community.

On one hand, Taylor is brilliant: I've been in advanced academics and working with extraordinarily talented students for 15 years, and Taylor is, without a doubt, among the strongest students I've ever worked with. His faculty for language, in particular, is extraordinary: he's one of those analytical/verbal people—he thinks like a philosopher. He can read anything, however archaic or abstract, and never misses nuance or tone. He enjoys cleverness with language—not the easy cleverness of puns but the intricate interplay of sound and meaning that make a sentence or a phrase perfect. He writes flawlessly—his natural voice is straightforward and organized and efficient. His scores reveal a similar aptitude for math and science, though I really think even there he's a word guy—his thinking, his understanding, is verbal in nature. His work ethic is beyond reproach: every assignment done flawlessly, tests studied for, cello practiced, community involvement accomplished. He makes busy look easy.

On the other hand, Taylor is defined by his Evangelical Protestant faith, and he very much belongs to a suburban, affluent Evangelical community. I'm talking church Sunday morning and Wednesday night, Young Life and Fellowship of Christian Athletes. This is a pretty common community in America, but it's not common at this school, for a variety of reasons: our student body is poor, urban, and minority. We are a STEM magnet with a decidedly secular feel. What with one thing or another, we have more openly gay atheist boys than evangelical Christians at this school, and more kids would admit to being undocumented than being pro-life. When 14-year old Taylor got here, straight from a little parochial white-flight school in the suburbs, it must have felt like he'd arrived in Gomorrah, but with a Freshman Calculus class. But instead of running for it (which I think he seriously considered), Taylor adapted—and the way he adapted is a testimony to his character and the key to why he will be such an important asset in an academic community.

For one thing, Taylor always brings his full intelligence and analytical ability to bear on his faith. There are strains of Evangelical Protestantism that discourage active and sincere questioning, but that is not Taylor's way. He questions everything, and he always embraces nuance and tone. So when he was suddenly immersed in an environment that challenged rather than reinforced his faith, he didn't feel threatened—rather, he appreciated the chance to really explore his own beliefs in a new context. Furthermore, his analytical nature means he is able to compartmentalize and to appreciate people that are truly different than he is. I, myself, could not be more different than Taylor in this way—I pretty clearly lean far left, and I know I've used cuss words in front of him he probably never even heard before—but we've always had a relationship defined by mutual respect and an honest willingness to learn from each other.

Second, he's a really nice young man who makes friends readily. I've watched him develop deep friendships with students so very different from him—racially and socioeconomically, of course, but also ideologically. He has really high and specific ethical standards for himself, but he doesn't worry about other people. He's used these last four years to learn about worlds he didn't know existed, and it's made him humble and thoughtful. We've had other, similar students in his position that didn't react as gracefully: suddenly being the minority is jarring, and some students react with resentment. Taylor, though, understands his own situation is a shadow of what many of his classmates face in other contexts, and rather than become bitter, he's become sympathetic and wise.

In many ways, college is traditionally the place where students like Taylor have the opportunity to learn what Taylor already knows—how to get along and work with people that are different than themselves. Taylor will be a catalyst for that process: he can move comfortably in literally any company, and he can translate between very different people—and teach them to connect to each other. If I were putting together a group of students for a long term research program and I was worried about group cohesion, Taylor is the person I'd select because he would be the model and the architect for mutual respect and cooperation. Also, he could write the paper.

Taylor thinks he's going to be an engineer. No one here believes him. He'll get the engineering degree, but it's clear to us he'll end up doing something larger than that: his skill set is too large, his interests and passions too broad, his gifts for working with people too profound. I don't know exactly what he will do—entrepreneur, author, large-scale project manager?---but it will be remarkable. He'll be a huge asset to your community from day one, and be a credit to the institution for decades after. He carries my very strongest recommendation. If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Amanda Ashmead, Humanities Chair