

Tips for Professors and Advisors on Letters of Recommendations

The Purpose of Letters of Recommendation

Recommendation letters are an important piece of the college application. *The Princeton Review* writes that “competitive colleges use the letter of recommendation to assess [a student’s] passions, goals, and character. They want more than just a statistic.”

As a potential recommendation writer, you are providing an important and integral service for your college-bound student. A good recommendation letter brings the applicant to life on the page. However, writing such a letter can be challenging if you are unaware of the conventions. What follows are some guidelines for high school teachers and guidance counselors for writing good recommendation letters, including knowing what to expect or ask from the student requesting a letter, how to incorporate sensitive or negative information, and what format a letter of recommendation should follow.

Accepting or Declining a Request to Write a Letter of Recommendation

Whenever you receive a student’s request to write a letter of recommendation, consider the following when making a decision whether or not to accept:

- **Your own schedule.** Do you have time to devote to writing an excellent letter of recommendation?
- **Your knowledge of that student.** Do you know this student well enough to write a positive letter? Sometimes the college or university to which the student is applying will ask the recommender to discuss the student’s academic work, or their engagement with their community.
- **Your qualifications.** Are you the best person for the job? Perhaps the student is applying to an arts college but you are a science teacher. You will want to be able to speak to the strengths of the student but also tailor them to their university of choice. For example, if you are indeed a science teacher writing a recommendation letter for a student intending to study art, you might focus on the student’s skills which are transferrable or relevant to either discipline, such as creativity, out-of-the-box ideas, or evidence of methodical thinking. Presumably the arts college is not as interested in your student’s talent for science as they are in how those skills might help your student succeed at their school.

If you agree to write a letter of recommendation for your student, consider these methods for gathering information and specific details to aid you in writing your letter.

- Meet with the student to discuss their academic and career goals, their choice of colleges or universities, and any extracurricular activities that might be relevant to their application. Discovering why the student has chosen *this* college or *that* university will help you tailor your recommendation letters (McBride 95-96).
- Consider discussing why the student has chosen you as their recommender. It might be because they particularly enjoyed your class, or they did very good work for you, or simply because they need a recommendation from a teacher of your subject. Having this conversation will bring to mind specific interactions between yourself and the student which will help you to avoid generalizations in your letter.

- If you cannot meet with your student, ask them to write a short paragraph about themselves and their goals.
- Ask for a copy of their resume so that you can add any relevant extracurricular activities to your letter. For example, you might include that Student Y has been the captain of her basketball team for two years, showing not only her willingness to take on a leadership role but also her aptitude for it. Remember to connect these details back to your personal interactions with the student. How did Student Y's role as captain of her basketball team translate to your classroom?

If you feel that you cannot write a positive recommendation letter for the student, whether because of your knowledge of the student's classroom behavior and work or because you simply do not know them well, it is in the student's and your best interest to decline. A negative or even a neutral recommendation letter can seriously harm a student's application. The letter of recommendation is not the space to work out a personal grievance against the student (Schall 43).

When declining a student request to write a recommendation letter, consider directing the student to faculty who may know them better and therefore be more qualified to write a recommendation letter.

Formatting a Letter of Recommendation

There are a few basic formatting rules when writing a letter of recommendation.

- Follow typical business letter format. More detailed rules regarding spacing, alignment and salutations can be found on the Purdue OWL by clicking [here](#).
- Always address the recommendation letter to the appropriate person. Your student should provide this information for you. "To Whom It May Concern" is a last resort.
- Print your recommendation letter out on the letterhead of your school, reinforcing your professionalism and authority.

Recommendation letters, like any other genre of writing, typically follow certain conventions. The recommendation letter usually consists of four major parts (Toglia). While genre conventions should never be followed formulaically, certain pieces of information are necessary and should be mentioned up front, such as for whom you are writing and your relationship to them.

- The **first section** usually states the relationship you have to the student, how long you've known them, and in what context (most often the classroom, or perhaps as an advisor).
- The **second section** should discuss the student's work in your classroom or their work for you in another context, perhaps as a TA or tutor for their peers. Whatever you discuss in the letter of recommendation should be specific and detailed. It should be clear that you know this student. Admissions committees are often suspicious of grandiose praise lacking details and evidence. Such statements as "She is the best student I've taught in my twenty years as an educator!" or "He is, hands down, the most intelligent student I've ever taught" are not treated as sincere or accurate value statements. For more advice on avoiding hyperbole, refer to the section **Avoiding Ambiguous Language and Hyperbolic Clichés**, below, where this is discussed further.
- The **third section** typically addresses a student's characteristics. This section should also avoid hyperbole and generalizations even though you are discussing intangibles. To say that "Student Z is a kind and patient mentor to the other students" is not enough; it is important to provide an example of Student Z demonstrating his mentoring abilities.
- The **fourth and final section** is your chance to summarize the student's qualities or accomplishments which you wish to emphasize. You might also include an invitation to call you if the admissions committee needs further information.

Finally, keep in mind that the letter of recommendation should not merely repeat what is listed on the student's resume. Keep your letter focused and personal to enhance the sincerity of your praise. Consider

focusing on one or two things you believe are most important for the admissions committee of College X to know about your student.

Often the university or college to which you are writing will have particular requirements or conventions. They might ask that you discuss a time when your student overcame an academic obstacle, or they might ask that you focus on the student's quality of leadership. **Also be aware of length requirements and due dates.** Not following the instructions or requests of the college's admissions committee could result in harming your student's college applications.

Be sure to double check your grammar and spelling as those kinds of mistakes can negatively impact your credibility as a recommender.

Avoiding Ambiguous Language and Hyperbolic Clichés

Recommendation letters are so often filled with unearned and hyperbolic praise that their value as objective and accurate accounts of student achievement and character has decreased. Thus, readers of recommendation letters are hypersensitive to the language used by the writer, reading criticism where there is none intended (Range et al 390-91). Often, ambiguous phrases are the culprit for communicating criticism.

For example, phrases such as "To the best of my knowledge," or "As far as I know," have the (perhaps unintended) consequence of distancing yourself from the student, suggesting that you do not know them that well at all.

Some other examples of ambiguous phrasing are below, taken from actual recommendation letters (Range et al 390-91):

- "After a slow start, he has moved from a high-risk student to a sure thing."
- "She sometimes appears unsure of herself, but that is not necessarily a bad trait."
- "She is certainly aware of her strengths and limitations and will not get into any trouble trying to do something she is not qualified to do."
- "He has developed adequate...skills to permit us to release him."

These phrases are marked by confusing nouns (what's a "sure thing"?) or qualified praise (being unsure of oneself is "not necessarily a bad trait"). Be direct and specific instead of assuming that the reader of the recommendation letter will have the same idea of what a "sure thing" is as you do. Also, watch out for praise that actually reads as thinly veiled criticism ("He has developed adequate skills...").

In addition to ambiguous language, avoid using hyperbolic praise. Readers find that letters are unhelpful when they contain statements that are "non-specific" such as "outstanding" (cite-Miller and Von Rybroek), or contain praise that is so extreme as to make the reader suspicious of its claims.

If you really are writing a recommendation letter for the "best student you have ever taught," then make sure that your praise is supported by specific examples which help define for admissions committees and readers what you mean by "outstanding."

Balancing Praise and Criticism

Because of their tendency to be full of over-the-top praise, recommendation letters are read with some skepticism by admissions committees. Whether due to a feeling of obligation towards the student, a fear that the student may read their letter, or because the letter is rushed to meet deadlines, recommendation letters tend to be filled with hyperbolic praise and generalizations. This tendency towards (unearned)

praise has decreased the value of a recommendation letter so that some programs have begun requiring four letters instead of two (Range et al 390).

Any praise should be supported by specific examples. Some of the best ways to incorporate examples about a student's accomplishments are to:

- Compare how the student relates to their peers. This can take the form of a statistic (e.g. class ranking) or an example of their leadership in your classroom.
- Offer some quantitative measure of their work. For example, GPA, scholarships, academic awards, etc. However, be careful that you do not simply copy the information from their transcripts and resume.
- Discuss the student's work in particular, either a paper that they wrote, an experiment they conducted, or their creative endeavors such as painting, sculpture, or photography.
- Discuss the student's contributions as part of a team or in a lab setting. (Schall 42)

Remember to choose examples that are relevant to the university to which your student is applying. For example, if your student is intending to study pre-law at her college of choice, you might focus on the three qualities or examples that demonstrate her aptitude for that area of study. Your recommendation letter should not read like a list of positive but unrelated examples and attributes.

Although readers of recommendation letters can be desensitized and therefore skeptical of over-blown praise, this also means that any criticism of a student stands out and might mean the difference between an acceptance or rejection of their application (Miller and Van Rybroek 116). Criticism of your student should be thoughtful and tempered by providing context. For example, you might include in your letter a discussion of Student X's poor performance for one semester, but also note that this was due to challenges at home.

Sometimes the college or university will invite your assessment of the applicant's weaknesses or areas for improvement. If that is the case, provide thoughtful criticism and cite the invitation as you give the critique. Restrain your criticism to one paragraph or less in the letter, making sure to avoid ambiguous wording which might seem like veiled criticism instead of an honest assessment of areas your student can improve (Schall 42). For example, the phrase "to the best of my limited knowledge" suggests that you do not know the student that well. Use direct and affirmative statements such as, "I know that her complexity of thought will grow in the intellectual atmosphere created by your university."

You could also tie criticism of the student to your own ethics as a writer of recommendation letter (Schall 42). For example, you might state that as a recommender you feel obligated to give a balanced assessment of your student in contrast to the typical recommendation letter which offers biased and suspect praise.

Including Sensitive Information

In requesting a letter of recommendation for a college application, the student has given tacit permission for you to share any information that might be relevant to writing a recommendation letter, such as GPA or class ranking. Unlike college students, high school students and their grades are not protected under FERPA (Heinz).

Students have the option to waive their right to see their letter of recommendation once it is written. Recommend to the student that they do this. Not only will it allow you to write more freely and sincerely, a letter that has not been read by the student is seen as more genuine and truthful by the admissions committee. Even if the student has waived their right to see their letter of recommendation, you may wish to share it with them. Do so in a case by case basis. Some teachers feel more comfortable than others in sharing letters they have written.

In your letter, you may feel obligated to provide potentially negative or neutral information. If this is the case, consider adding a request to contact you for further information regarding the student. You might wish to write a very positive recommendation letter but also feel the need to explain more fully the obstacles your student has had to overcome, or perhaps extenuating circumstances for their poor performance in the classroom. Remember, if you feel that you cannot write anything positive about the student requesting a recommendation letter, it is in both your best interests to decline.

Sample Letter of Recommendation

Do your best to find out from your student who will be reading your recommendation letter. Otherwise, the salutation should read "To Whom It May Concern:"

Here the recommender establishes the kind and the length of her relationship to the student.

Dear Admissions Officer Amy Adams:

It is with great pleasure that I am writing this letter of recommendation for Susie Student. In the past four years, I have taught Susie in a number of visual arts courses in all of which she has excelled. Based on my experience with Susie, I can say without the shadow of a doubt that she is one of the most naturally talented and hardworking art students with whom I have had the opportunity to work. She is exceptionally well prepared to move onto the collegiate level, and it is clear to me that she has a very bright future in the creative arts.

This paragraph focuses on Susie Student's maturity in her creation of art, and offers specific details about her "methodical creative process," which supports the recommender's claim that Susie is mature for her age.

Susie is very mature for her age and she approaches her art with an astute sense of objectivity. She processes constructive criticism well and is always willing to go the extra mile in order to take her work to the highest level of formal and conceptual refinement. Susie has a very methodical creative process; she develops her concepts thoughtfully, creates interesting exploratory sketches, and builds meticulous scale models before she commits herself, with confidence, to the fabrication process. Once Susie begins fabrication, she works with precision and purpose. Her skills of craftsmanship are highly developed and she has an incredibly astute attention to detail. In addition, I have been impressed by Susie's ability to couple her attention to detail with a broader stylistic focus that allows her to consider how effectively her compositions function as a whole. Therein, Susie creates sculptures that are cohesive in form and eloquent in their communication of sophisticated concepts. All in all, Susie is an incredibly well rounded art student who has found a way to balance all of the aspects of the creative process with apparent ease.

The recommender transitions into a discussion about something intangible, her work ethic. However, the recommender is careful to give specific examples which support her assertion that Susie has a good work ethic, such as her role as mentor in the classroom.

Aside from Susie's natural artistic ability, it is important to touch on her work ethic and her presence in the classroom setting. Susie never settles for second best and she utilizes class time in a productive and determined manner. She arrives to class early and works late when the need arises. Due to this approach, Susie quickly became a role model for her peers in all of my classes. Students observed Susie's commitment to the creative process and they strived to excel as she did. Though Susie is very talented, she is a humble young woman who never lets her abilities go to her head. She thrives off of the entire creative process both the successes and the challenges. Most importantly, Susie is always willing to help her classmates as they create. She offers both technical and conceptual support to her peers in a kind and caring manner that speaks to Susie's patience and her understanding of the importance of collaborative learning.

Notice that although the recommender is discussing the future which he cannot predict, he does not offer qualifying statements such as "to the best of my knowledge" which might cast doubt on his praise of Susie. Instead, he sticks to direct and affirmative statements.

In looking ahead to Susie's college years, I am certain that she is ready to tackle the rigorous and challenging curriculum of the collegiate level. Susie will not take the path of least resistance, rather, she will push herself to continue to grow and develop as a creative thinker. She will immerse herself in her new community and she will share her energy, enthusiasm, commitment and talent with her peers and her professors. Susie Student is an exceptional candidate and it is with the utmost

A final positive statement of recommendation.

confidence that I recommend her to your college or university. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions.

Offering additional information on request demonstrates not only your desire to support your student beyond the letter, but also allows an Admissions Officer to follow up on the information you offer. This is especially important when it comes to any potentially negative or neutral information in the letter which might benefit from a phone conversation.

Sincerely,

Timothy Teacher

