

Letters of Recommendation: Who, When and How

Many colleges rely on personal recommendations to round out an applicant's formal application. Recommendations help the admission officers learn about an applicant by reading what teachers, counselors, activity sponsors and employers have to say about a student as a scholar, leader, team player, individual and citizen. Sometimes recommendation writers are asked to respond to specific questions or write about specific traits, and other times they are allowed to write freely.

Many colleges will ask for a letter from a teacher or counselor. You may want another letter from someone you've worked with or who knows you well outside of school.

Who to ask:

- Ask teachers, mentors and supervisors who know you well.
- Make sure you present a balanced picture. This means you may not want to ask two teachers from the same area of study (math, science, English, etc.) or activity.
- Make sure you select the teachers who can present the strongest recommendation, and not necessarily the ones who are your favorites.

When to ask:

- Ask early! Be the first to ask the teacher and not the last. Teachers may get several requests, and writing letters takes time.
- Give ample time for the letters to be written and mailed prior to a deadline.
- Provide the recommenders with envelopes addressed and stamped to each of the colleges if the writers are to send the letters.
- Check back with the letter writers. Give them a gentle reminder before the deadline approaches, and then confirm that the letters were mailed.

What a letter of recommendation can say: Consider ahead of time what you want the recommender to address in the letter, and provide a summary or resume that might help. You may want different writers to focus on different traits. One, for example, may write about your academic ability while another may address your leadership. Your letter may want to showcase:

- How you contribute to class discussions
- The depth of your understanding of the material being presented in class
- What motivates you
- Your potential for success
- How you handle challenges and setbacks
- How your ability matches your achievements
- What sets you apart
- What your peers have to say about you
- Leadership abilities
- Involvement in the community
- Sense of humor

Don't forget: Say thank you. Regardless of whether you are admitted to a specific college, thank your letter writers for their work. If you do get admitted, be sure to let them know.