

Recommendation Letters

As an English teacher and college counselor working with high school students, I've had the privilege and responsibility of writing letters of recommendation. Starting out, I had a strong urge to help, but no clear sense of what exactly should go into a reference letter. If they all speak to students' impressive qualities and accomplishments, what makes some letters stand out among the rest?

To answer this question, I researched recommendation letters from both sides of the college process, drawing on the advice of high school counselors and teachers and the perspective of college admissions officers. I also read dozens of recommendation letters, from the ones that admissions committees loved to the ones that were cast aside as mediocre, useless, or straight up negative about a student.

This article compiles the most important lessons I learned through this research and my own work supporting students through the college process. Read on for a discussion of what exactly needs to go into the kind of rec letter that effectively advocates for a student and boosts her admissions chances.

First, let's take a deeper look at what purpose recommendation letters serve when they arrive before an admissions committee.

The Goal: What's the Purpose of Letters of Recommendation?

Admissions officers put a lot of weight on recommendation letters. Especially in selective admissions, when thousands of qualified students are competing for a limited number of spots, reference letters can go a long way toward **differentiating one student from another**. According to Harvard dean of admissions William Fitzsimmons, recommendation letters are "extremely important" and are read "with great care" (often projected onto large screens in front of the whole committee!).

So what are all these carefully reading admissions officers looking for? Two main features. The first is an insightful, in-depth story of the student that reveals **both her academic skills and personal qualities**. As a teacher, you're in a great position to comment on a student's intellectual curiosity, creativity, and attitude towards learning.

Additionally, you can speak to a student's admirable personal qualities, like her sense of integrity, compassion, and leadership skills, to name a few. This in-depth look gives an admissions committee **a holistic view of your student beyond the grades and clubs listed on their application**. It helps the student come to life.

The second main feature that admissions committees typically look for is a student's **potential to contribute positively to the college community**, as well as to succeed after graduation. In your recommendation, you can state your confidence about a student's success on campus and future achievement.

Certain qualities are especially impressive to admissions officers and hint at success in college, though this might vary somewhat by individual. Some of these qualities include love of learning, academic commitment, communication skills, commitment to mastery of a specific skill or area, and **leadership capacity**.

Since these personal qualities may not be apparent on the rest of the application (apart from the student's own personal essay), the letters of recommendation can go a long way toward describing a student's best traits. Plus, they show that **a student has teachers who are motivated to advocate for her**.

Of course, hopefully no one would agree to recommend a student and then write bad, sabotaging things in the recommendation letter. It's generally safe to assume that all recommenders *want* to support students in continuing their education. But mediocre letters can often be just as bad as ones that are outright critical, and merely "good letters" pale in comparison to excellent ones. So what must go into a letter of recommendation to make it particularly **strong and effective**?

How to Write a Strong Letter of Recommendation

The strongest letters of recommendation take time and thought to craft. They're **individualized to each student** and are thoughtfully revised for word choice and flow of ideas. First and foremost, what content is essential for a strong letter of recommendation?

Include Key Content

Perhaps the best way to describe what a letter of rec should include is to start out by describing what it shouldn't include. A rec letter should **not** simply be a restatement of a student's grades, clubs, and awards. All of these facts and figures should already be stated on the student's application.

The most ineffective rec letters just **repeat a student's resume**. Admissions officers are hoping for deep insights into a student's character, rather than a list of data points that could apply to any number of students.

This is not to say that recommenders shouldn't mention what a student has achieved or been involved in, but they shouldn't feel compelled to list every single accomplishment. Instead, writers can point to a **specific involvement or story that demonstrates something meaningful** about the student.

For instance, you might be writing about Michael, whose powerful commitment to equality and education led him to establish a Gay-Straight Alliance at the school. In this way, you're discussing something a student has done to illuminate something significant and admirable about his character and motivations. Speaking about his establishment of the GSA is more **illustrative** than simply stating that he's committed to equality and social justice.

So if reiterating the student's grades and activities (ie, resume points) shouldn't go into the rec letter, what should? MIT offers an insightful breakdown of the questions its admissions officers would like answers to in a letter. These questions are a useful guide for recommenders writing to any college.

- What is the **context of your relationship** with the applicant?
- Has the student demonstrated a willingness to take intellectual risks and go beyond the normal classroom experience?
- Does the applicant have any **unusual competence, talent, or leadership abilities**?
- What **motivates** this person? What **excites** him/her?
- How does the applicant interact with teachers? With peers? Describe his/her **personality and social skills**.
- What will you remember most about this person?
- Has the applicant ever experienced disappointment or failure? If so, how did he/she react?
- Are there any unusual family or community circumstances of which we should be aware?

Source: MIT Admissions

A recommender doesn't necessarily have to answer all of these questions, but they're great starting points for brainstorming. They shift the focus from what a student does to what a student is like, in terms of her **intellectual curiosity, specific skills or talents, passions, and personality**. Some other impressive qualities include communication skills, resourcefulness, and innovative problem-solving. Admissions committees often also look for demonstrated leadership and the ability to collaborate with others in an interactive and diverse environment.

Beyond these personal qualities, letter writers might speak to unusual circumstances or challenges that the student has faced or survived. These can be especially meaningful to explain a dip in academic performance or to show how a student has overcome hardship. I would advise getting the **student's permission** before including personal family information, just to make sure she's comfortable with you sharing it.

Finally, a recommender may want to demonstrate her own familiarity with the school to which the student is applying. If the school is particularly competitive, then you might express your confidence in the student's ability to thrive in an academically rigorous environment. If you're an alum of the school, then you can believably assert your confidence that the student would be a **strong cultural fit**.

The strongest recommendation letters give insight into a student's intellectual orientation, motivations, and personal qualities. As a writer, how can you rave about your student in a sincere, genuine, and convincing way? One of the best ways to accomplish this is to **focus your recommendation on the student's best assets**.



Highlight your student's most important strengths.

Highlight the Most Important Themes

Just as you don't have to feel compelled to repeat every grade, club, and award on the student's resume, you also **don't have to speak about every quality** that makes the student great. In fact, well-rounded students aren't necessarily what the most competitive schools are looking for. While selective schools look for academic excellence in most subjects, what they really appreciate is a student's singular commitment to a specific and distinct area.

Developing a "big spike" in a certain area shows **passion, dedication, and the ability to sustain long-term focus**. As [PrepScholar co-founder and Harvard alum Allen Cheng writes](#), top colleges are looking for students who are going to change the world. They're expecting deep achievement, and the best predictor of that is deep achievement in high school. Therefore admissions committees are especially impressed by a "huge spike" in science, writing, athletics, or whatever your commitment might be.

Of course, not all or even the majority of students are applying to Ivy League schools, but the takeaway message still applies. Recommendation letters don't have to present the student as well-rounded and good at everything they do. Instead, they can **paint a specific picture** and highlight the qualities that are most important to understanding who the student is and what drives her actions.

Some letters may highlight that a student is a top scholar, while others may speak to a student's leadership skills. Some may focus in on the student's passion for volunteer work, or her talent in acting, art, music, or athletics. For students with extensive international experience, recommenders may rave about their multicultural, global perspective or unusual maturity and sophistication.

Other students may have had to overcome hardships in their life, and the recommender could speak to their resilience and strength as a survivor. As mentioned above, I would

suggest discussing this kind of content with the student to make sure she's comfortable sharing it with admissions committees. All in all, a recommender can brainstorm a list of the student's best assets (with the aid of the student's resume and "[brag sheet](#)"), and **zero in on the most important themes**.

What if the student hasn't demonstrated interest in a particular area, but you're excited to see her further explore her interests in college? In this case, you could write earnestly about the student's **room to grow** and the potential you see in her. At the same time, be careful with this kind of wording, as it may suggest different things to different admissions officers. If you really feel not able or qualified to provide the student with a recommendation that will help her admission chances, then you should **respectfully decline or suggest someone else** better able to write her letter.

Once you've chosen the most important themes to highlight about a student, you can think about **specific stories, experiences, or observations** that demonstrate those strengths. The best recommendation letters "show," rather than just "tell."



Bring your letter to life with meaningful stories and examples.

Give Specific Examples

Which sentence paints a better picture in the mind of the reader?

a) *Kate is a strong writer.*

b) *Due to Kate's superlative writing and analytical skills, I'll be using her year-long thesis on representations of gender in Jane Eyre as an example of the highest quality work to students in my future AP English classes.*

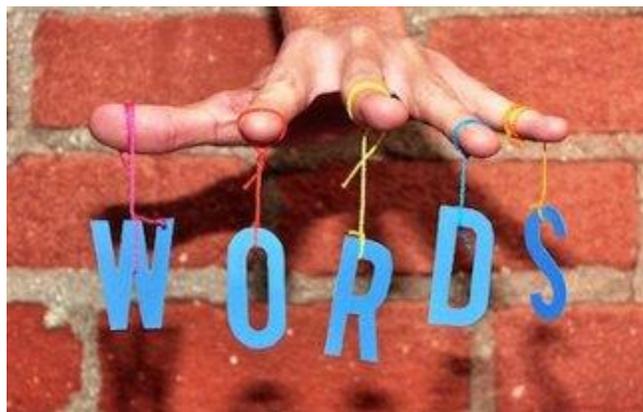
The second uses more powerful words, but more importantly it **gives a specific example**, thereby proving that Kate has strong writing skills. It explains the grounds on which the teacher draws her conclusion that Kate is a good writer. It additionally suggests that Kate can sustain focus in a long-term project and impressed the teacher so much that her thesis became a model for future students.

The best recommendation letters support their praise of a student with specific anecdotes and observations. These stories accomplish a few things. One, they **support the writer's claims**. Rather than just listing adjectives, the writer backs up her description with examples.

Secondly, they **make the letter more interesting** and help the student come to life in the eyes of admissions officers. Officers may be up all night reading through applications. The last thing they want is a generic, boring recommendation letter that blends into all the others. Interesting stories make both the letter and the student [pop](#).

Finally, the use of specific stories proves that the recommender is, in fact, **qualified to assess the student**. The best letters come from teachers who know a student well. Sharing anecdotes and observations prove that you've gotten to know the student thoroughly and your evaluation of her is trustworthy and reliable.

In addition to sharing examples, you should take the time to **be intentional with your word choice**. Consider which phrases and adjectives will present the clearest and strongest endorsement of the student.



Dance, words, dance!

Use Powerful Words

As with any piece of writing, the best recommendation letters are eloquent, clear, and **don't fall into the trap of cliches**. Calling someone a *go-getter with a heart of gold who leaves no stone unturned* and is a *friend to all* may elicit a yawn or eye roll from the admissions officer.

Often finding just the right word happens in the **revision stage**. Check if you wrote *interesting* when *creative* or *innovative* would work better. Keep an eye out for *nice* when you meant to dive into a student's unique *empathy* or *compassion* for others. Perhaps you wrote *hard worker* when *intellectual risk-taker* would more accurately describe the student.

Some words and phrases that can be used to describe a student's academic strengths include *insightful, analytical, curious, observant, innovative, or mastery of a specific subject area*. Others that fall more in the arena of personal and professional strengths include *mature, flexible, generous, empathetic, leader, versatile, ethical, motivated, ambitious, resourceful, and strong communication skills*.

Admissions officers have read hundreds, if not thousands, of recommendation letters, and **they're used to reading between the lines**. Be intentional with your wording so you don't accidentally communicate something negative about the student. For instance, a phrase like "*leads by example*" or "*excels at working independently*" could indicate that the student keeps to herself and has trouble working with others.

While it's more important to be authentic and not worry too much about what an admissions officer may or may not think, this mindset can help you **be purposeful with what you say and how you say it** in your letter. You can also keep an eye out for sounding over the top with your phrase. While the best letters rave about their students, they have the examples to back up their praise. Simply listing superlative adjectives could come off as overblown and insincere.

A second technique that may impress admissions officers is the **use of a high ranking**.



Rank the Student Highly, When Appropriate

Consider these ranking statements:

Carla is the most talented and driven math student I have taught in my twenty years at High School High.

James is one of the top three students I have ever had the pleasure of teaching.

An impressive ranking, like the two above, certainly **communicates a strong vote of confidence in a student**, especially if it comes from a teacher with hundreds of students to compare her recommendee to. If your student is applying to a selective or Ivy League school, then a powerful ranking can go a long way toward testifying to a student's outstanding achievement and qualities.

On the other hand, a ranking like "above average" or "relatively strong effort compared to her peers" **may do more harm than good**. If you can genuinely provide a statement of high ranking, then you can help the student by including it. If not, then it's probably advisable to leave that kind of statement out of your letter.

Apart from a statement of ranking, there are a few other key components to include in your letter of recommendation. While you can be creative and customize your letters to each student, there are a few **essential pieces of information** that you should include in all your letters.



Include all essential elements.

State All Essential Information

There are a few necessary pieces of information to include in all recommendation letters that I touched on briefly at the beginning of this article. The first is an **explicit statement of who you're recommending**. If you can customize your letter for each college, all the better. Second, you should state **who you are**, your position at the school, and the contexts in which you've gotten to know the applicant.

If you've gotten to know the student both in class for a year and as editor of the school newspaper, then this shows you've taught and supervised her in different contexts and are especially qualified to evaluate her. Admissions officers usually prefer recommendations from **junior year teachers**, as they had the student recently and for a whole year. A senior year teacher probably doesn't know the student very well yet, and sophomore and freshman year was too far in the past. Exceptions to this general rule include having the student for more than one year or supervising her in other capacities, like clubs or sports.

You can begin the letter with a creative or catchy hook, or a more straightforward statement of endorsement, as long as you include these key components in the introduction. Here are a few examples.

It is my great pleasure to provide this recommendation for Kate, who I enjoyed teaching and getting to know as her 11th grade AP U.S. History teacher.

I have known Joe since 2012 in my position as Lincoln High School's Biology teacher.

I am delighted to write this recommendation for Rosa, whom I have known for two years as her Psychology teacher and academic advisor.

Please accept this letter as my enthusiastic endorsement of Chris, the top student in my 11th grade AP Chemistry class.

After introducing the student, your relationship with her, and your statement of recommendation, you can go on to provide your evaluation, while keeping in mind the above mentioned suggestions, like focusing on important themes and using specific stories, powerful language, and a statement of ranking. If you want to balance out your recommendation by presenting a weakness, I would suggest doing so in a mild way, perhaps with an explanation of how that weakness could be turned into a strength.

In your letter's conclusion, it's a good idea to restate your support for the student, while also talking about **how you envision the student being successful at college**. Admissions officers want to build a strong, dynamic, and diverse class with a range of abilities and interests. By attesting to the student's potential for future success and contributions at campus, you can reassure admissions officers that she is a student they want at their school.

Finally, you can conclude your letter with your **contact information and an invitation to call or email you with any further questions**. Use an official letterhead, and welcome them to get in touch for any further discussion of the student.

To sum up, let's go over the *do's* and *don't's* of writing recommendation letters for students applying to college.



Key Points to Remember

Do:

- Include key content, like who you're recommending, who you are, how you know the student, and **what makes you qualified to evaluate her**.
- Be **enthusiastic** in your recommendation, discussing both a student's academic ability and potential and her character and personality.
- Highlight **a few key qualities** that you think are essential for admissions officers to understand who the student is and what she can accomplish.
- Use **specific stories, examples, and anecdotes** to support your evaluation.
- Be intentional in your word choice, making sure to **powerful words and phrases** and to avoid cliches.
- Provide a high and impressive **ranking**, when applicable.
- Conclude with a strong statement of support, **vision of the student's future success**, and invitation to the admissions committee to follow up with you if need be.

Don't:

- Simply **repeat resume points or quantitative data** that are already listed on other parts of the application.
- **Cast too wide a net** and end up saying very little, because you tried to say too much.
- List adjectives without having examples to back them up.
- Use **generic**, bland, unenthusiastic language or cliché statements.
- Use similar letters for more than one student, especially if the students are applying to the same schools (the same admissions officers will see this!)
- Agree to provide a letter of recommendation unless you can honestly recommend a student.

Finally, not all students develop strong connections with their teachers, perhaps because they have trouble participating in class or their school has a large teacher to student ratio. To help you write your recommendation, students may provide a "brag sheet," where they talk about their goals and what's important to them, as well as a resume. If you need **more information or time to talk** to the student, it can help to meet with her and have a conversation or two. I always found the easiest letters to write were for students who were open and eager to share their plans and personality.

If you feel you haven't gotten to know a student as well as you need to to write a compelling and insightful letter, then it may help to elicit her thoughts and feelings, as well as make time to get to know her better. As long as you **have the raw materials**, in terms of a good relationship, stories, and observations, then you can use these suggestions and examples to craft a thoughtful, customized letter of recommendation that will help her get into college.

As you write, remember your mission: to differentiate the student as a unique and impressive candidate, to shed light on both her intellectual and personal qualities, and to give admissions officers a holistic view of the person that will show up on campus in next year's class.