

# Why are Recommendation Letters Important?

The majority of admissions officers at four-year colleges, especially private schools, emphasize that their process is *holistic*. They seek to gain a sense of the student as a "whole person," rather than focusing on pieces of who she is based solely on grades and test scores. Since they rarely meet the student in person, the recommendation letters, along with the student's own personal essay, **play a huge role in illuminating her intellectual and personal qualities.**

That's why recommendation letters from teachers, especially those who know their students well, carry a great deal of weight in applications. A letter that expresses a strong vote of support, as well as **highlights a student's impressive academic and personal strengths**, can have a powerful effect on that student's chances of admission.

Let's look at some samples of strong recommendation letters, one from an English teacher, another from a physics teacher, the third from a history teacher, and the final one from a math teacher. Then we'll break down exactly why these letters of recommendation are effective.

The first example recommends Sara, a senior who loves to write and read poetry.

Sample Letter #1: Sara the Poet

*Dear Admissions Committee,*

*I had the pleasure of teaching Sara in her 11th grade honors English class at Mark Twain High School. From the first day of class, Sara impressed me with her ability to be articulate about difficult concepts and texts, her sensitivity to the nuances within literature, and her passion for reading, writing, and creative expression- both in and out of the classroom. Sara is a talented literary critic and poet, and she has my highest recommendation as a student and writer.*

*Sara is talented at considering the subtleties within literature and the purpose behind authors' works. She produced an extraordinary year-long thesis paper on creative identity development, in which she compared works from three different time periods and synthesized cultural and historical perspectives to inform her analysis. When called upon to give her thesis defense in front of her peers, Sara spoke clearly and eloquently about her conclusions and responded to questions in a thoughtful way. Outside of the classroom, Sara is dedicated to her literary pursuits, especially to poetry. She publishes her poetry in our school's literary magazine, as well as in online magazines. She is an insightful, sensitive, and deeply self-aware individual driven to explore art, writing, and a deeper understanding of the human condition.*

*Throughout the year Sara was an active participant in our discussions, and she always supported her peers. Her caring nature and personality allow her to work well with*

*others in a team setting, as she always respects others' opinions even when they differ from her own. When we held a class debate about gun laws, Sara opted to speak for the side opposite her own views. She explained her choice as motivated by a desire to put herself in other people's shoes, view the issues from a new perspective, and gain a clearer sense of the issue from all angles. Throughout the year, Sara demonstrated this openness to and empathy for the opinions, feelings, and perspectives of others, along with shrewd powers of observation, all qualities that makes her outstanding as a student of literature and burgeoning writer.*

*I am certain that Sara is going to continue to do great and creative things in her future. I highly recommend her for admission to your undergraduate program. She is talented, caring, intuitive, dedicated, and focused in her pursuits. Sara consistently seeks out constructive feedback so she can improve her writing skills, which is a rare and impressive quality in a high school student. Sara is truly a stand-out individual who will impress everyone she meets. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions at callmeclemens@gmail.com.*

*Sincerely,*

*Ms. Scribe  
English Teacher  
Mark Twain High School*

This is a thorough, glowing recommendation for a student that Ms. Scribe clearly knows well. What other features make it stand out as a strong letter of rec?

## **The Breakdown**

Ms. Scribe has a high opinion of Sara and her skills at writing and literary analysis. One way that she expresses this is by using **powerful and specific language**. She doesn't merely say Sara is a good writer. She says she's articulate about difficult concepts and sensitive to the nuances within literature. She calls her insightful and self-aware with shrewd powers of observation.

These descriptors don't happen by accident. Ms. Scribe took the time to **choose her words carefully**, and that effort paid off with a strong letter that captures Sara's special qualities.

Ms. Scribe also supports her characterization of Sara with **examples**. She describes her thesis paper and how she responded to questions thoughtfully under the pressured situation of her thesis defense. She gives the example of the debate on gun laws to illustrate Sara's openness to many different points of view.

In addition to illuminating her intellectual and personal strengths and supporting them with specific examples, Ms. Scribe speaks to **Sara's goals for the future**. She points out that she is talented at writing, poetry specifically, and that she is committed to continuing to improve as a writer in her future.

This letter, by virtue of its wording, length, and specificity, shows that Ms. Scribe took the **time and effort** to recommend Sara thoughtfully and with conviction. The fact that she knows Sara well and is committed to helping her application succeed with a thoughtful letter further adds weight to her assessment.

This letter would be a boon to Sara's application, especially if she's applying to study writing or English. She clearly impressed her English teacher and, in return, got a memorable, complimentary letter of recommendation for her college application.

This next example is similarly **enthusiastic and detailed**. It's for a student applying to an engineering program.

## Sample Letter #2: Stacy the Engineer

*Dear Admissions Committee,*

*It is a great pleasure to recommend Stacy for admission to your engineering program. She is one of the most exceptional students I have encountered in my 15 years of teaching. I taught Stacy in my 11th grade honors physics class and advised her in Robotics Club. I am not surprised to find out she is now ranked at the top of an extraordinarily capable class of seniors. She has a keen interest in and talent for physics, math, and scientific inquiry. Her advanced skills and passion for the subject make her an ideal fit for your rigorous engineering program.*

*Stacy is a perceptive, sharp, quick individual with a high aptitude for math and science. She is driven to understand how things work, whether they be the old computer hard drives in the school library or the forces that hold our universe together. Her final project in class was especially impressive, an investigation of frequency-dependent sound absorption, an idea that she said was sparked by not wanting to bother her parents with her hours of guitar practice at home. She's been a strong leader in Robotics Club, eager to share her knowledge with others and learn new skills. I have the students in the club prepare lessons and take turns leading our after-school meetings. When it was Stacy's turn, she showed up prepared with a fascinating lecture on lunar nautics and fun activities that got everyone moving and talking. She was our only student teacher to be met with much deserved applause at the end of her lesson.*

*Stacy's personal strengths are as impressive as her intellectual accomplishments. She's an active, outgoing presence in class with a great sense of humor. Stacy's the perfect person to get a group project rolling, but she also knows how to sit back and let others take the lead. Her cheerful nature and openness to feedback means she's always learning and growing as a learner, an impressive strength that will continue to serve her*

*well in college and beyond. Stacy is just the kind of driven, engaging, and curious student that helped make our classroom a lively environment and safe place to take intellectual risks.*

*Stacy has my highest recommendation for admission to your engineering program. She has demonstrated excellence in all that she puts her mind to, whether it's designing an experiment, collaborating with others, or teaching herself to play classical and electrical guitar. Stacy's endless curiosity, combined with her willingness to take risks, leads me to believe there will be no limit to her growth and achievements in college and beyond. Please don't hesitate to contact me at milevamaricfanclub@gmail.com if you have any questions.*

*Sincerely,*

*Ms. Randall  
Physics Teacher  
Marie Curie High School*

Ms. Randall is clearly as much of a fan of Stacy as she is of Mileva Marić. How does she communicate her recommendation?

## The Breakdown

Ms. Randall plugs for Stacy right off the bat with a **statement of outstanding ranking**: Stacy is *one of the most exceptional students* she's had in 15 years of teaching. A statement like this is pretty extraordinary and will make an impact in the mind of its readers. Stacy sounds like a special student, and she chose her recommender well.

Like in the last example, this letter uses **strong, specific language**, calling Stacy a perceptive and sharp person who has the confidence and good humor to take intellectual risks. Through its accurate and expressive language, this letter helps Stacy come to life in the mind of the reader.

Beyond the evaluation, Ms. Randall gives **specific examples** of Stacy's academic and personal strengths. She talks about her successful teaching in Robotics Club, her leadership in group projects, and her dedicated practice to teaching herself to play the guitar.

Rather than spreading the letter too thin, Ms. Randall **highlights a few core themes**. She connects Stacy's love of music with her passion for physics by talking about the frequency-dependent sound absorption project. All the threads tie together in a nice, memorable bow.

This letter is a strong vote of support for Stacy's application to an engineering program. Her physics teacher admires Stacy's skills and goals, and she made it clear that Stacy had **her highest recommendation** in this letter.

This next example also comes from a teacher who's extremely impressed with his student. It focuses on the student's performance in class and his volunteer work outside the classroom.

### Sample Letter #3: William the History Buff and Social Organizer

*Dear Admissions Committee,*

*It is hard to overstate the meaningful contributions that William has made to our school and surrounding community. As both his 10th and 11th grade History teacher, I've had the pleasure of seeing William make profound contributions both in and out of the classroom. His school and community service is motivated by a strong sense of social justice, which he informs through a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of historical trends and events. I can say with confidence that William is one of the most caring and driven students I've ever taught in my fifteen years at the school.*

*As a child of immigrant parents, William is especially drawn to understand the immigrant experience. He produced an extraordinary semester-long research paper on the treatment of Japanese-Americans in the U.S. during WWII, in which he went beyond all expectations to conduct Skype interviews with relatives of his featured subjects to incorporate into his paper. William has a great capacity to draw connections between past and present and to ground his understanding of current issues in the context of historical events. He never retreats to a simple answer or explanation, but is comfortable dealing with ambiguity. William's fascination with U.S. and World History and skill for deep analysis have him an exemplary scholar, as well as a motivated activist driven to promote civil rights and work towards social equity.*

*In sophomore year, William noticed that the college planning seminars students attended included little information for first generation or immigrant students. Always thinking about how institutions can better serve people, William spoke with counselors and ESL teachers about his ideas to better support all students. He helped collect resources and design a college planning curriculum for immigrant and undocumented students to enhance their college access. He further helped organize a group that connected ESL students with native English speakers, stating his mission to be helping ELLs improve their English and increasing multicultural awareness and social cohesion at the school as a whole. William identified a need and worked with students and faculty alike to meet it in an extremely effective and beneficial way. Ever the history scholar, he did plenty of research to back up his ideas.*

*William believes passionately in social progress and working for the common good. His own personal experiences, along with his profound grasp on social history, drive his advocacy work. He is a talented, intelligent student with the charisma, confidence,*

*strong values, and respect for others to make a huge difference in the world around him. I'm looking forward to seeing all the good that William continues to do for his fellow humanity in college and beyond, as well as the excellent work that he will produce at the college level. William has my highest recommendation. If you have any questions, please contact me at [thethingstheycarried@gmail.com](mailto:thethingstheycarried@gmail.com).*

*Sincerely,*

*Mr. Jackson  
History Teacher  
Martin Luther King, Jr. High School*

Mr. Jackson's letter makes William sound like a pretty amazing student and person. How does he go about expressing his admiration for William in this rec letter?

## The Breakdown

Like Ms. Randall did in her letter, Mr. Jackson provides a **statement of outstanding ranking** for William, calling him one of the most caring and driven students he's ever taught. Considering his long teaching career of 15 years, this says a lot about William as a student and a person.

Also like in the last example, Mr. Jackson focuses on **a few core aspects of William's character**. He talks about his love of history and how it informs his social activism. He comments on his exceptional historical scholarship, as well as his personal qualities of caring for those around him and working for the social good.

Mr. Jackson also gives insight into William's **personal life**, explaining how he has a personal connection to his projects and volunteer work as the child of immigrant parents. This letter reveals that William is a thoughtful, motivated individual who connects his own experiences with his learning and desire to contribute to his community.

The letter also showcases William's exceptional accomplishments by giving **specific examples** of William's research paper and his work supporting the academic and personal needs of ELL students. Mr. Jackson expresses his enthusiastic recommendation while illuminating William's love of learning and strength of character. This letter would be both impressive and memorable to admissions officers considering William for admission to their school.

This next example comes from a math teacher. Let's see what Mr. Wiles has to say about Joe.



## Sample Letter #4: Joe the Hard Worker

*Dear Admissions Committee,*

*It is my pleasure to recommend Joe, who I taught in my 11th grade math class. Joe demonstrated tremendous effort and growth throughout the year and brought a great energy to class. He has that combination of a positive attitude and the belief that he can always improve that's rare in a high school student, but so essential to the learning process. I am confident that he will continue to display the same commitment and diligence in everything he does. I highly recommend Joe for admission to your school.*

*Joe would not describe himself as a math person. He's told me on several occasions that all the numbers and variables make his mind go fuzzy. Joe did, in fact, struggle to comprehend the material at the beginning of the year, but his response to this is what really struck me. Where so many others have given up, Joe took on this class as a welcome challenge. He stayed after school for extra help, got extra tutoring at the nearby college, and asked questions in and out of class. Due to all his hard work, Joe not only raised his grades, but he also inspired some of his classmates to stay after for extra help, as well. Joe truly demonstrated a growth mindset, and he inspired his peers to adopt that valuable perspective, too. Joe helped contribute to our classroom environment as one where all students can feel supported and able to ask questions.*

*Joe's strong belief in his ability to acquire new skills and improve through practice was likely shaped by his years as a baseball player. He's played all through high school and is one of the team's most valuable players. In his final for our class, Joe designed an impressive project calculating and analyzing batting averages. While he initially described himself as not a math person, Joe reaped the benefits of his tremendous effort and found a way to make the subject come alive for him in a way that he was personally invested in. As a teacher, it is incredibly fulfilling to witness a student make this kind of academic and personal progress.*

*Joe is a trustworthy, reliable, good-humored student and friend who supports others in and out of the classroom. He was a pleasure to have in class, and his positive attitude and belief in himself, even in the face of difficulty, is an immensely admirable asset. I'm confident that he will continue to demonstrate the same diligence, perseverance, and optimism that he showed myself and his peers. I highly recommend Joe for admission to your undergraduate program. Please feel free to contact me with any further questions at [fortheLoveofAlgebra@gmail.com](mailto:fortheLoveofAlgebra@gmail.com).*

*Sincerely,*

*Mr. Wiles  
Math Teacher  
Euclid High School*

While the students featured in the first three examples were top of their class or demonstrated leadership in the school, Joe isn't a top achiever in the traditional sense. However, this recommendation is still a strong one, even if it says he struggled in the teacher's class. What does Mr. Wiles focus on to recommend Joe?

## **The Breakdown**

Mr. Wiles writes a strong letter for Joe, with the same kind of **enthusiasm and specific examples** as the other three letters. Even though Joe may not have gotten the strongest grades in his math class, he found an enthusiastic recommender in his math teacher. Mr. Wiles was extremely impressed with Joe's attitude, effort, and [growth mindset](#), which he demonstrated throughout the year and inspired in his fellow classmates.

Mr. Wiles focuses on Joe's substantial personal strengths, ones that would likely be **impressive to his future educators**. Even in a subject that may not come naturally to him, Joe is diligent and committed. He's not self-conscious about asking questions or seeking extra help, and he retains a strong belief in himself that he can continuously learn, improve, and acquire new skills.

This letter, like the others, is effective because it is focused, supportive, and backed up with examples. As you can tell from these examples, recommendations can communicate a great deal about a student. Because of this, they can have a powerful impact on a student's chances of admission. So **what can teachers and students do** to make sure they are sending a strong recommendation letter that will help their chances?