

Writing a Strong Letter of Recommendation



Effective teacher recommendations can play a critical role in the admission process. Teachers provide insights about students such as their strengths and potential for success. A well-written teacher recommendation can make a student come alive! As you write your letters, or provide guidance to others who may be asked to write letters, here are a few thoughts to consider.

- **Show, don't tell** – Anecdotes are powerful tools. Provide concrete examples of your interactions with the student inside or outside of the classroom that highlight the student's character, academic abilities or stellar qualities. Whether it's a description of how they approached a group project or how their absence impacted classroom discussion or how their eyes light up when talking about a topic that excites them, your stories will convey their curiosity and engagement in a way that little else can.
- **Write about the student, not about yourself** – A recommendation is not an opportunity for you to talk about your achievements or strengths as a teacher. Context is certainly important, so if you've been teaching for 25 years and a particular student is the best you've ever taught, then write that. Otherwise, the recommendation is not a place to share your resume or C.V.
- **Focus on the classroom** – In their zeal to be as supportive as possible, some teachers write letters that are more expansive than necessary – detailing everything from classroom projects to extracurricular activities to family background. As you write, focus on the attributes that you are uniquely positioned to address – the student's academic engagement. Before you write, take a look the [sample Teacher Evaluation form](#), which asks you to rate your students in several areas. Even if you elect not to check boxes on the form, knowing what

qualities matter to colleges can help you hone your descriptions, and help you to write a letter of great impact.

- **Provide an honest and fair assessment** – You will want to think about the following – How does this student contribute to the classroom experience and the learning environment? Has this student gone above and beyond in some way? What potential do you see in this student? Is your class significantly different (in a negative way) when this student happens to not be in class?

- **Don't be afraid to say no** – There will probably be some students for whom you just can't write a positive or effective letter. In those cases, you should say no... gently, but without apology. You might also consider guiding the student to another teacher who might be a stronger advocate. Better to disappoint the student than to write a weak letter that does not benefit the student or the college.