

How to Get Letters of Recommendation

How to Get the References You Need

Most college applications request two or three recommendation letters from people who know you in and out of the classroom. It's your responsibility to find appropriate people to write these letters on your behalf. You also need to give them enough time to write a thoughtful letter. Start by discussing the process, and possible candidates, with your counselor and family.

Whom should I ask?

Read the application carefully. Often colleges request letters of recommendation from an academic teacher (sometimes in a specific subject), your school counselor or both. If the college requests a letter from an academic teacher, and the subject is not specified, your English or math teachers usually make good candidates.

You should also ask one of your teachers from junior year, or a current teacher who has known you long enough to form an opinion of your potential. It is best not to go back too far; colleges want current perspectives on their potential candidates.

It can also be good to get a recommendation from a teacher who knows you outside the classroom — for example, the teacher who shaped your performance in the class musical. Whoever you ask should be able to attest to your academic and personal achievements and potential.

When should I ask?

Make sure to give your recommendation writers plenty of time — at least one month before letters are due — to complete and send your recommendations, but the earlier you can ask the better. Many teachers like to have the summer to write recommendations, so ask them during the spring of your junior year. If you apply under early decision or early action plans, you'll need to ask at the start of the school year, if you didn't ask earlier.

How can I get the best possible recommendations?

Talk to your recommendation writers. For teachers, it's important that they focus on your academic talents and accomplishments within their classroom, because that's what colleges are looking for in teacher recommendations.

Talk to them about what you remember about their classes and your participation in them. Remind teachers of specific work assignments or projects you did, what you learned and any challenges you overcame. Give them the information they need to provide specific examples of your achievement.

It's also important that you spend time talking with your counselors and ensure they know about your plans, accomplishments and pursuits. You may want to provide them with a brief resume of your activities and goals; a resume can provide the best overview of your high school involvement and contributions.

Also, if there is some aspect of your transcript that needs explaining — for example, low grades during sophomore year — it's helpful to talk with your counselors to explain why and how you've changed and improved.

Helpful Tips

- Don't be shy. Teachers and counselors are usually happy to help you, as long as you respect their time constraints.
- Supply your recommendation writers with addressed and stamped envelopes for each college to which you're applying.
- Provide teachers and counselors with deadlines for each recommendation that you are requesting.
- On the application form, waive your right to view recommendation letters. This gives more credibility to the recommendation in the eyes of the college.

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- Probably you know your teachers well enough to know who can provide favorable reviews of your accomplishments. If in doubt, don't hesitate to ask if they feel comfortable writing a recommendation. In some cases, you may have no choice about whom to ask, but when you do, make the best choice possible.
- Follow up with your recommendation writers a week or so prior to your first deadline, to ensure recommendations have been mailed, or to see if they need additional information from you.
- Once you've decided which college to attend, write thank-you notes to everyone who provided a recommendation and tell them where you've decided to go to college. Be sure to do this before you leave high school.

EXAMPLE OF AN EXCELLENT LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

(Provide your recommender with the information and personal experiences to write such a letter.)

To Whom It May Concern:

It is my privilege to recommend Joe Student to you for the University College Leadership Scholarship. I have had the pleasure of teaching Joe in 11th grade Honors English. Joe was an outstanding member of one of the first Honors English classes I taught at Manchester High School, and in true student-leader fashion, met with me several times outside of class to discuss my expectations for the students and explain where he and his fellow students stood academically, allowing me to tailor my teaching to their specific needs. In class, Joe was an active participant in discussions, and his comments revealed insight into the literature that I have rarely found in a 16-year-old student. He was also aware of his weakness in writing and would often come to school early to receive extra help on his essays.

As I was new to the Manchester area at the time, Joe invited me to attend his church, where he is an active member of the youth group and participates in mission trips each year. Not only was the church ideal for myself and my family, but I was also able to get to know Joe in a nonacademic setting, as well as meet his family. Many of Joe's qualities that I have observed in the classroom -- dedication, enthusiasm, insight, leadership -- are just as prevalent outside of school. Joe is a fine role model to the younger members of the church, who adore him. He is actively involved in the church's Habitat for Humanity housing project, and volunteers his time each Saturday to help in the construction of several houses. Joe is certainly not afraid of hard work -- he always volunteers for the most tiring and dirtiest jobs at the construction sites, and his example serves to engage many of his peers who would otherwise loaf around.

During the second semester of his junior year, Joe, normally an A and B student earned several C's in his classes. What his transcript does not reveal is that during the semester Joe's grandmother finally lost her five-year battle with cancer. Joe was particularly close with his grandmother and was devastated by the loss. I watched Joe struggle to keep up with his school work, but the time missed during hospital visits and funeral services, which came at a critical time during the semester when many projects and tests were scheduled, proved to be too much. However, as his stellar grades during the first semester of his senior year show, the grade slump was merely a temporary problem and not indicative of Joe's commitment to academic excellence.

When I think of a leader, I think of Joe. The Manchester High soccer team has certainly benefited from Joe's role as team captain, as their winning record shows. Joe is the ideal leader in the sense that he never expects anything of his teammates that he would not expect of himself. On the field or on the sidelines, his voice can always be heard encouraging his teammates. And while this example and many others could be given to show Joe's character, the one I find most revealing is his participation in the National Honors Society. Although he lost his bid for president of the organization, Joe remained an active participant, singlehandedly organizing and spearheading a schoolwide food drive that raised over 10,000 cans for a local soup kitchen. His willingness to remain involved and continue leading despite losing the election speaks volumes for Joe's character.

I wholeheartedly recommend Joe to you. University College will be enriched by his presence as the Manchester community has been.