

Tips for counselors

Writing recommendations...

For college admission officers, the counselor's letter of recommendation is a key part of the application. You provide the broader context for what's in the rest of the application.

How has the applicant functioned in his or her school and community? What resources were available to the student, and how did he or she use them to accomplish goals? By addressing such questions, your letter gives texture to the applicant's file, fills in information gaps, and helps present a complete picture of the student to the reader.

Get started by gathering information

- Unless you know the student well already, you may want to interview him or her, or have the student fill out a self-assessment. Your counselor colleagues or teachers might also be able to provide insights.
- Sample questions for students:
 - What two or three activities or interests have meant the most to you? Why?
 - What three words would you use to describe yourself? What words would your teachers use? Your parents? Your friends?
 - Is your transcript a fair evaluation of you as a student? Why or why not?
 - What do you plan to study in college? What experiences have helped you make this decision?

What to write

- Describe the student's distinguishing qualities. Think about ways in which the student shows intangible qualities, such as initiative, tenacity, persistence, enthusiasm, or leadership.
- Pull together the many aspects of the student — academic record, extracurricular and community activities/achievements, character and personality — and place them within the larger context of the student's everyday life. Provide examples and background information, and explain any extenuating circumstances. Your letter can include both the highs and the lows, and the mundane as well as the profound or surprising.
- The best recommendation letters show that you know the student personally. If you can, use anecdotes relating to your individual interactions with the student. These examples help your letter stand out to the reader.
- Show how this student will be an asset to the college, both in the classroom and elsewhere on campus.
- Illuminate the student's growth and development during high school, and the level of maturity the student has reached. Give examples of how he or she has worked to improve and overcome obstacles and challenges. This is important even for a straight-A student!
- If you are familiar with the college to which the student is applying, it is helpful for you to speak to the match between the student and the institution.
- You may want to show a draft of the letter to a colleague to get feedback.

Evidence is the key to a great recommendation

- A statement about a student is most effective if you can follow it with an example that illustrates your point. Be as concrete and detailed as possible. Provide evidence whenever possible!
- Avoid sweeping generalizations.
- Colleges are looking for your feelings about the student.
- Admission people certainly love a good story, but the substance of the recommendation is more important than the style of writing.
- There is no need to repeat lists of courses and activities found elsewhere in the student's application. Save the space for your insights!
- Be concise. One good page is generally sufficient, but don't sacrifice important content.
- Your recommendation supports and advocates for your student and is certainly an important part of the application. However, your recommendation cannot, by itself, get the student admitted or denied — there is no one part of an application that can do that.
- Make each letter as individual and unique as your student.
- Proofread your letter!
- Always make a copy of the recommendation, even if you post it on an online form. Students may come back for a second one. Occasionally, a recommendation is lost and you may be asked to re-submit the letter.