

Tips for teachers

Writing recommendations...

One of your students has asked you to write a letter of recommendation for his or her college application. Where do you start? What are colleges looking for? How can you best convey the qualities you've seen in this student?

Here's some advice from college admission officers.

What are colleges looking for?

- Most importantly, the teacher's recommendation should shine a spotlight on the applicant's abilities in the classroom.
- Colleges are interested in the student's intellectual purpose, motivation, relative maturity, integrity, independence, originality, initiative, leadership potential, capacity for growth, special talents, and enthusiasm.

Before you start

- Ask the student for a résumé or activity list, including honors, interests, extracurricular activities and academic achievements. As a teacher, you can't be expected to keep track of the lives of all your students, and a résumé can prevent omissions or mixed-up information that can result in a student feeling slighted. Reviewing the résumé can also help you complement, without duplicating, the rest of the student's application.
- Ask the student why you have been selected to write the recommendation. The reason may provide a clue as to what the student is looking for.

What to write

- Provide the reader with some background about your knowledge of the student and your qualifications for comparing this student with others, such as:
 - How long you've been teaching, both the subject and at the school.
 - The context in which you've interacted with the student, and how well you know him or her.
 - Examples showing that you've been in a position to observe the student's abilities and growth.
- Try to illuminate academic qualities that go beyond the GPA, such as engagement, interest, creativity, and evidence of independent work. What does the student read? Where does the student's intellectual curiosity lead him or her?
- Questions you might want to answer in a recommendation:
 - What distinguishes this student from other able students?
 - What kind of a learner is this student?
 - Did the student do any special projects for class?
 - Was the student prepared and did he or she actively participate in class?
 - Did the student go above and beyond what was required for the class?
 - What did the student add to the class on a day-to-day basis?
 - How does this student compare to others you've taught over the years?

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.