

How to Get a Great Letter of Recommendation

Colleges often ask for two or three recommendation letters from people who know you well. These letters should be written by someone who can describe your skills, accomplishments and personality.

Colleges value recommendations because they:

Reveal things about you that grades and test scores can't

Provide personal opinions of your character

Show who is willing to speak on your behalf

Letters of recommendation work for you when they present you in the best possible light, showcasing your skills and abilities.

When to Ask for Recommendations

Make sure to give your references at least one month before your earliest deadline to complete and send your letters. The earlier you ask, the better. Many teachers like to write recommendations during the summer. If you apply under early decision or early action plans, you'll definitely need to ask for recommendations by the start of your senior year or before.

Remember that some teachers will be writing whole stacks of letters, which takes time. Your teachers will do a better job on your letter if they don't have to rush.

Whom to Ask

It's your job to find people to write letters of recommendation for you. Follow these steps to start the process:

Read each of your college applications carefully. Schools often ask for letters of recommendation from an academic teacher — sometimes in a specific subject — or a school counselor or both.

Ask a counselor, teachers and your family who they think would make good references.

Choose one of your teachers from junior year or a current teacher who has known you for a while. Colleges want a current perspective on you, so a teacher from several years ago isn't the best choice.

Consider asking a teacher who also knows you outside the classroom. For example, a teacher who directed you in a play or advised your debate club can make a great reference.

Consider other adults — such as an employer, a coach or an adviser from an activity outside of school — who have a good understanding of you and your strengths.

Perhaps most important, pick someone who will be enthusiastic about writing the letter for you.

If you're unsure about asking someone in particular, politely ask if he or she feels comfortable recommending you. That's a good way to avoid weak letters.

How to Get the Best Recommendations

Some teachers write many recommendation letters each year. Even if they know you well, it's a good idea to take some time to speak with them. Make it easy for them to give positive, detailed information about your achievements and your potential by refreshing their memory.

Here's how:

Talk to them about your class participation.

Remind them of specific work or projects you're proud of.

Tell them what you learned in class.

Mention any challenges you overcame.

Give them the information they need to provide specific examples of your work.

If you need a recommendation letter from a counselor or other school official, follow these guidelines:

Make an appointment ahead of time.

Talk about your accomplishments, hobbies and plans for college and the future.

If you need to discuss part of your transcript — low grades during your sophomore year, for example — do so. Explain why you had difficulty and discuss how you've changed and improved since then.

Whether approaching teachers, a counselor or another reference, you may want to provide them with a resume that briefly outlines your activities, both in and outside the classroom, and your goals.

Final Tips

The following advice is easy to follow and can really pay off:

Waive your right to view recommendation letters on your application forms. Admission officers will trust them more if you haven't seen them.

Give your references addressed and stamped envelopes for each college that requested a recommendation.

Make sure your references know the deadlines for each college.

Follow up with your references a week or so before recommendations are due to make sure your letters have been sent.

Once you've decided which college to attend, write thank-you notes. Tell your references where you're going and let them know how much you appreciate their support.