

TEACHER RECOMMENDATIONS

This is one of those parts of the application which many Kenyan applicants routinely fail to take seriously. Given that recommendations do not play any role in the Kenyan College Admission process, many Kenyan teachers may not be aware of what constitutes a good college recommendation. Any applicant must, therefore, make every effort to ensure they brief those writing their recommendations on what it should entail.

Most competitive schools require at least two recommendations from teachers and school counselors. The most selective schools usually require three. It's much better to get recommendations from teachers with whom you've established a friendship. You should approach a teacher who knows you intimately and would therefore be in a better position to appraise your particular interests and achievements; don't necessarily think the most popular teacher at school will write you the best letter of recommendation. Give your teachers plenty of time to compose recommendations for you. The best time to request them would be during the school holidays when they are not under the pressure of the school schedule. Do not approach them too close to the deadlines. In selecting teachers to write your recommendations, do select ones who know you from different contexts and therefore ones who can write about you from different perspectives. Of course there will be shared experiences between the different teachers, but you should ensure your recommendations span the entire breadth of your secondary school experience by carefully selecting the teachers writing them.

By reading the recommendation, the admission officer should have an idea of a student's academic achievement, intellectual promise, quality of writing, creativity, original thought, productive class discussion, respect accorded by faculty, disciplined work habits, maturity, motivation, leadership, integrity, reaction to setbacks, concern for others, self-confidence, initiative and independence. The above must be supported with specific anecdotes/examples. For instance, Ben's recommendation may read: "Ben is a very creative and proactive young man; once he learned the complexities of creating a bio-energy generator, he led a team of classmates in designing a simpler yet more power-saving version to use on his science congress project."

To help applicants get the best recommendations from their teachers, we have included a Teacher Recommendation Data Sheet below. By honestly filling the Data Sheet and submitting it to your teacher, you will give them the information they need to write an effective recommendation.

Colleges are also interested to know how you spend your time away from school. Some applicants may have been involved in substantial extra-curricular activities with their church, youth group, etc, either during the school term or during the school holidays, while others may have been in employment. Getting recommendations from mentors, patrons, or employers who worked with you in such activities may give additional invaluable insight about you.

The recommendations should be typed or printed on school letterheads and signed by the teacher. The teacher may photocopy it for each school, so long as they certify each of the copies. Finally, since your teachers invest a lot of time and energy in writing the letters and hope that you will be successful, they would like to know the outcome of your application. Be courteous - please inform them of your admissions decisions.

Teacher Recommendation Data Sheet

Teacher's Name:

Student's Name:

E-mail address:

Phone:

Students: The information on this form should only pertain to your performance in this teacher's class. Be honest in your answers as this will best help your teacher when produce a more thoughtful and effective recommendation.

Teacher: Thank you for agreeing to write this recommendation. Please use the student's worksheet as you form your letter of recommendation keeping in mind that your input will be greatly valued by the admission officers reviewing the student for admission and possibly, scholarship.

STUDENT WORKSHEET

1. My potential course of study (major) will be:

2. List the previous courses you have taken within this department and the average grades you earned:

(course)

(grade) (course)

(grade)

3. Why have you asked this particular teacher to write your recommendation letter? (What do you hope this letter will show about you that your transcript and test scores don't?)

4. Describe your performance and contributions to this teacher's class and support it with particular incidences of your contribution. (A significant presentation, discussion, etc.)

5. Based on what your teacher knows about you, what would you like the admissions officer to know about your academic ability? (Highlight strengths, passion, areas for improvement in the subject, etc.)

6. Describe a project, paper or presentation from this class which you enjoyed or are most proud of.

7. What positive adjectives could this teacher use to describe you and give an example? (E.g., *Creative* – Once we learned the complexities of creating a bio-energy generator, I led a team of classmates in designing a simpler version to use on our community service project.)

8. Were your grades in this class affected by any personal or outside obstacles? If you have not done particularly well in the class, are there any reasons to explain why? (Your teacher should be able to use this information to highlight what you did since then to improve)

9. Related to the subject being taught, have you done any out of class projects or activities that enhanced your classroom experience? (E.g., an internship or public speaking, science congress, yearbook activities which were helped through English class.)

10. Remind the teacher of any interactions you have had with them outside the classroom through clubs, volunteer work, school trips, etc. Describe any memorable conversations or funny experiences you have had with this teacher.

11. What else would you like the teacher to know that will help them in writing the best possible recommendation for you?

==Sample Letter of Recommendation 1 ==

I like, respect, and admire Ouma about as much as any young man I have known in my fifteen years of teaching. I first met Ouma in my Form 1 Physics class. Even then, he exhibited superior intellectual curiosity and maturity, and it has been exciting to watch him develop these talents.

Ouma's intellectual forays are astounding. Despite his heavy involvement in all facets of school life, he has consistently been a top performer in all his four years here. He is due to sit for his National Examinations in about two months, and I have no doubt that he will be among the top ranked students nationwide. He is particularly good at evaluating and synthesizing ideas, seeing patterns, connecting various strands of ideas and integrating them into a powerful compact. His mind is logical and analytical, and he is unlikely to blindly follow the crowd in anything he does.

Ouma's accomplishments in these last four years surpass what many students achieve in their lifetimes. A natural leader, Ouma was the School Captain in his final year, a responsibility he has held with dignity and aplomb. The entire student body and members of staff respect him for his humility, ability to generate consensus, remarkable energy with which he discharges his duties and unparalleled leadership virtuosity. His will to help others is unsurpassed. Recently, he volunteered to cycle 50 kilometers for his house so as to raise money for school fees for needy students in that house. For a school whose motto is "Strong to Serve," he is a shining example of service to others. His achievements have won him accolades far outside the school gates. He won the coveted award of Best Actor at the recently concluded National Drama Festival. The adjudicator's comments on his performance capture the greatness of this young man: "Ouma has set standards that are way above this level. In his role as Inoka he brings both power, commitment, and compassion, that only one bestowed with these gifts can lend to the performance." His depth of experience and activity make him stand head and shoulders above his peers. Ouma is also an accomplished athlete, posting an impressive time of 1:44:45 in the 800 meters race at the District level competitions. I believe that with proper training and facilities, he has the potential to excel in this arena at the highest level.

Perhaps the thing that has impressed me most about Ouma is his humility and drive to help others. Ouma possess the strong conviction to help others, especially the less fortunate members in society, and it is this calling he would like to pursue in future through his academic forays. Even during the busiest time of the year for final year students with exams round the corner, Ouma has continued to go and provide encouragement and support at the nearby Old People's Home. As the patron of the Social Welfare Society, I usually accompany the group to the Old People's Home. I am always thrilled and inspired when I see the elderly men greet him affectionately as "Mzee" or the old, wise one.

Ouma has left an indelible mark on all those who have known him. Alliance High School has produced many young men who have gone on to do great things. Ouma is undoubtedly a member of this group. He will make lasting impressions anywhere he goes and in everything he engages in. For him, the future is just beginning.

==Sample Letter of Recommendation 2==

To Whom It May Concern:

Carrie Youstis is an exceptional young lady. Most everyone knows of her intellectual acumen, lofty ambitions, dancing abilities, and kindness; indeed, she is a sort of legend in her small hometown of Southwest Plainsfield, NJ, but few know of the struggle Carrie endured during her middle years of high school. Carrie had a close friend, Kaya, whom she had met at summer camp. She and Kaya had grown very close during the first two years of high school.

During the middle of tenth grade, Carrie received news that Kaya was suffering from a rare degenerative disease. It was terminal, Carrie was told but did not cry. She did not even take a moment to worry about how this might affect her. She simply called me, her principal, and asked if she could miss a few days of school, explaining to me the grave situation. I told her that, of course, she may miss school, provided that she make up her work.

Then, before she hung up, Carrie asked me to pray on her friend's behalf, and said, "I can go on without Kaya -- I have many friends and I will mourn but I have a wonderful life. Kaya is suffering so much, though, and when it's all over, that will be it for her. And she is her mother's only child. How will she go on?" I was so impressed that Carrie was thinking about everyone affected except herself: Kaya, Kaya's mother, but not Carrie Youstis. Such maturity. Carrie knew she had a wonderful life, a belief in God, but she felt for others so profoundly.

Carrie visited Kaya often for several months, always bringing her cards and flowers and of course, good cheer. Kaya finally passed away that Spring, and Carrie made sure to visit the mother every week that following summer.

You will read of Carrie's grades and scores and sports abilities, of her awards and accolades; I wanted to relate this episode, as it characterizes what this remarkable young lady is really all about. As she graduates high school, I and all of Southwest Plainsfield are so sad to see her go, but realize that she is destined to effect great things far beyond the narrow confines of a small town in New Jersey.

Sincerely,

Esti Iturralde
Principal, North Southwest Plainsfield High School

==Sample Letter of Recommendation 3==

This letter is intended to serve as a college recommendation for Ezra Edlarruti. I have been acquainted with Ezra for four years but came to know him well last year, as he was in the one class that I taught, a thirteen-student junior English class.

Last spring, while he was singing the lead in "The Marriage of Figaro," Ezra became especially interested in a short story that we read as a class, Albert Camus's "The Guest." It is a challenging story for any reader, and Ezra became interested in the subtleties of interpreting it, especially in the difficulties inherent in the translation of such a story. What did Camus really mean to say and how might his intentions have been compromised by its English translation? Ezra read the original, French, version of the story and then wrote a superb analysis of the compromises inherent in its English translation. His essay was flawless -- his wording apt, and his analysis insightful, logical and comprehensive. Some of our English faculty can't write so well.

Students and faculty often remark that Ezra is blessed with considerable talent. What many of them overlook is how hard Ezra works to cultivate his talent, whether it be the development of his beautiful voice for an operatic performance or of his writing skills as he works through an essay. I know of the effort that he put into book reviews of 1984 and Animal Farm because he shared early drafts with me. I also appreciate the time that he put into his analysis of "The Guest" because he stopped by periodically to share his enthusiasm for the project and his progress with it.

In over twenty-five years of teaching, I have known other students with talent equivalent to Ezra's. Many of them lacked his good nature and humility, and few demonstrated the genuine intellectual curiosity that Ezra has exhibited over and over -- a curiosity that is often accompanied by his excitement or enthusiasm for an idea, an author, a literary work or the lead role in a challenging operatic performance.

When I decided to set up a debate on Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience," regarding the role of government in our lives today, in an effort to have the class appreciate more fully the contemporary implications of Thoreau's sophisticated essay, it was Ezra who was most helpful in creating a resolution that would lead to that appreciation. Ezra, to no one's surprise, then agreed to argue on any side of the debate.

Ezra is a motivated young man of numerous talents and considerable self-discipline. He is fun-loving, likable, enthusiastic, trusting and trustworthy.

Gary Youstis

Acknowledgments:

1. Sample Recommendation 1: Kaniaru Waciene, Andrew Muriithi; "THE ALLIANCE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT'S GUIDE TO ADMISSIONS TO U.S UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTIONS"
2. Sample Recommendation 2: <http://www.resume-resource.com/letterofrecommendation-example2.html>
3. Sample Recommendation 3:
<http://businessmajors.about.com/od/samplerecommendations/a/RecSample9.htm>