

Letters of Recommendation

How to Stand Out from the Crowd

Most college applications request two or three recommendation letters from people who know you in and out of the classroom.

Whom should I ask?

Read the application carefully. Often colleges request letters of recommendation from an academic teacher (sometimes a specific discipline), your school counselor, or both. If a non-specified academic teacher is requested, your English or math teachers usually make good candidates. Also, you should use a teacher from junior year, or a current teacher if they have known you long enough to form an opinion. It is best not to go back too far, as colleges want current perspectives on their potential candidates. All the better if you get a recommendation from a teacher who's also been involved with you outside the classroom, but unless a college specifically requests it, don't use a coach or someone who can't speak to your academic 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 as with anything, the earlier the better. Many teachers like to have the summer to write recommendations, so if you asked last spring, you're doing great. 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 request one last spring.

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 class and your participation in it. Highlight a particular incident, paper, or anything else that might help them provide anecdotal information and specific examples of your achievement, rather than just vague praise.

It's also important that you spend time talking with your counselors and ensure they know about your plans, accomplishments, and involvements. 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—perhaps 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.

Include addressed and stamped envelopes for each school to which you're applying.

Provide teachers and counselors with deadlines for each recommendation that you are requesting, especially noting the earliest deadline.

On the application form, waive your right to view recommendation letters. This gives more credibility to the recommendation in the eyes of the college.

Typically, 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 as to who to use, 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 have 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.