

Resources for Writing Recommendations: Care if Highly Recommended

By Margaret Thornton

One of my former college professors used to joke that he wrote, "I can't recommend this student too highly" in letters of recommendation and let the readers interpret what he meant. At least I think he was joking. Either words are inadequate to describe this outstanding student or, conversely, there simply isn't much good to say. Take your choice.

Ambiguous statements like that are confusing, but one thing is perfectly clear: If you are a college-bound senior, recommendations can impact your future.

Who writes recommendations for college admission? Your guidance counselor for sure. Almost every application has a form for the guidance counselor to complete. Often counselors must rank students' motivation, responsibility and difficulty of curriculum. Yep, those courses count. Ideally the guidance counselor should be able to say that you took an appropriately challenging class load.

What if you don't know your guidance counselor well or the counselor is new to your school? Many counselors are responsible for as many as 300 students. If you are not at the top of the class or you are not in danger of failing, your counselor may not have had time to haul you into the office to talk one-on-one about college. If your guidance counselor doesn't know you well, you should take the initiative and make an appointment. If your counselor is new to the school, it's especially important that you make the effort to have a personal conversation about your goals, concerns and questions.

If your English teacher hasn't required you write a resume, do one yourself. Many counselors like to keep a copy of students' resumes in their offices for a quick overview. Besides, the resume is a great pre-application exercise. You will be able to transfer much of the info on your resume right to your applications.

Some colleges require an additional recommendation or two, and you will get to choose who writes those. Choose wisely. First, the person who writes a recommendation should know you well in a "professional" capacity. The person could be a teacher, school administrator, employer, adviser or coach. Even better if the reference has worked with you in more than one capacity (for example, teacher and National Honor Society adviser). A pastor or youth group leader can serve as a character reference. Christian colleges often require a pastoral reference. If you have been involved in local service projects or in a community organization, a community reference can be an asset. A family friend reference is less valuable. This person likes your family but has no "professional" relationship to you. The letter that says "I've known Johnny's parents for years, and he comes from such a wonderful family" doesn't do much for you.

Next, be sure the person you select really has positive feelings about you and can write specifically about your qualities, activities, and goals. Think carefully. If you have not worked hard in a teacher's class or you haven't done your share in an organization, that teacher or adviser won't be a good choice for you.

Last year I served on two scholarship committees. Applicants had to submit a recommendation with the applications -- a simple checklist plus a few lines for comments. For both scholarships, one applicant submitted recommendations from the same teacher. Obviously the kid thought this person would say positive things. She was wrong. In both cases, the teacher said that the student did not work up to her potential and was irresponsible, and in both scholarship selections, the student's application went to the bottom of the stack. Too bad. This student did not choose wisely. She obviously had no idea how this teacher really felt about her.

Finally the person you choose should be able to write. No, not everyone can do that. Most folks can complete the simple recommendation forms, but save the letters for those who have writing skill. Also select someone who will do more than what I like to call the "general good kid letter."

This letter says that the student is generally cooperative, generally does above-average work and generally is liked by all. In other words, the recommendation says nothing specific about the student and is generally worthless. Be sure that the person you choose will take time to write specifics about you -- and offer that resume when you request the recommendation.

Confidentiality is important in recommendations. Most recommendation forms will ask if you waive your right to have access to the recommendation. The answer should always be "Yes." If you refuse to waive your right to see the recommendation, you will make it worthless, and you certainly will show lack of confidence in your reference. Most writers will simply mail the letter or form on their own, but if one is returned to you in a sealed envelope, don't be tempted to peek. Recommendations must be confidential.

Because the person writing for you is doing you a favor, be as courteous and accommodating as possible. Ask for the recommendation early -- preferably two weeks before you need it. Be specific about when the letter is due. Just as you shouldn't dash off your college application essay at the last minute, you shouldn't expect someone to write a last-minute letter for you. Hurried writing usually isn't the best writing, and you want your recommendation to be quality.

Also provide the writer with any information that he or she should include. This is especially true if the recommendation is for a scholarship. What are the criteria for getting the award? Be sure the letter writer knows that information so that the recommendation can explain how well you meet those criteria. Give this information to your reference in writing. If the recommendation form requires personal information about you (name, address, etc), fill in that information before you give the form to your reference.

Provide an addressed, stamped envelope if the writer is to mail directly. Your reference shouldn't have to pay postage. If the letter is to be returned to you or to the counselor for mailing, provide an envelope with your name and the name of the college or the scholarship on the front. Ask the writer to put the letter in this envelope and write his or her signature across the flap to ensure confidentiality.

Politely remind your reference as the due date for the letter approaches. You can do this by writing a thank-you note or verbally thanking your writer for preparing the recommendation.

Your gratitude not only is polite, but also will jog your writer's memory if he or she hasn't completed the letter yet.

You should have at least three people to whom you can turn for letters of recommendation, but the nice part is that you can turn to these folks more than once. Most writers save their work on their computer, so it doesn't take nearly as long for the writer to prepare a second letter for you. Granted, your reference will need to change some details to make the letter fit a particular college or scholarship, but once the basic recommendation is complete, the writer can make those changes quickly.

Should you send more than the required number of recommendations? While you might be tempted to beef up your application with additional letters of support, most of the time that's unwise. As one admissions director put it, "the thicker the file, the thicker the kid." References are important, but they usually won't compensate for poor grades and weak test scores. Send what's required.

I hope that you have established yourself as a good student who is positively involved at school - someone who is easy to write about. Keep in mind, that this isn't the last time you'll be asking for recommendations. As a college senior, you will turn to faculty to do recommendations for you as you pursue graduate school or the job market.

As you begin your college career, realize that you will need to "cultivate" some brand new references. That means you have to get to know your professors well. Don't be the anonymous kid in the back of the large lecture section. Sit in the front; make eye contact; introduce yourself to your professors. Make such a positive impression that there will be no doubt what the professor means if he or she writes about you, "I can't recommend this student too highly."

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