



Writing “Good” Letters of Recommendation



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As students prepare for college, their time in high school nearing its end, they turn to their teachers for assistance one final time. Colleges want to understand who students are in the classroom, and who better to learn this from than their high school teachers?

In this guide, we’ll go over how to brainstorm for a letter of recommendation, and how to turn that into the kind of letter that will help your students realize their dreams. You know your students best, and that knowledge is invaluable.

WHO WE ARE

Ivy Scholars is a Houston-based educational consulting company. We pride ourselves on helping students get into the colleges that are best for them, so they can fulfill their academic aspirations.



Brainstorming Exercise

This exercise is meant to be a jumping-off point, to give you some guidance for starting a letter, or developing one further. Answering these questions about a student, and formatting them into an essay, will let you create a more complete picture of your student.



Plan Your Time

1

Do you believe this student deserves a great letter of recommendation? Are you willing to spend ~2 hours making sure you’ve written them the best letter possible? If not, do the student a favor: tell them you won’t be able to write the letter for them.

Gather information

2

What field of study is the student interested in? Make note of any special or unique programs within the university they are looking at. For instance, a student applying to a dual degree program, like MET (business and engineering) at Berkeley, looks very different from a student applying to an engineering program alone.

What are the student’s other accomplishments? If they haven’t given you a resume/brag sheet, ask for one. The topics on these sheets illustrate important points about a student, and give firm evidence for claims of their capabilities

Establish Relationship

3

How long have you taught this student? Which classes? Do you have a relationship outside of class? How does this student’s work stand out? How does their work compare to their peers? Why do you like this student? If you’re an experienced teacher, you’ve learned to sort students into “types” - what type are they? How do they break the mold?

Discuss Achievements

4

What are a few ways the student excelled? Schools are trying to create a well-rounded student body, more than they look for well-rounded students, so detailing a few small areas of passion in depth is more useful than trying to mention everything. How does the student’s progress demonstrate their potential for continued success in college?

Edit

5

Leave a letter alone for a few days, and then reread it. Does it sound sincere? What image does it paint of the student? Reexamine word choice; cliches and overused terms are best avoided, as the number of letters read causes them all to run together, and uninteresting letters will be forgotten. Beware of subtext, and be intentional with use of language. Be certain that the letter doesn’t imply anything you aren’t actually trying to say.

Sample letters

Now we'll examine how other teachers have put these steps into practice. The goal is not to merely write an acceptable letter, but a great one, which will show universities who a student is, and what they're capable of.

To the Admissions Committee

I am honored to recommend John Doe for admission to your institution. I taught John as a junior in my AP English Language and Composition course during the 2018-2019 school year. His work in my class was defined by his logical mindset, and he demonstrated critical thinking and problem-solving abilities that exceeded those of many of his peers. I have no doubt that John will make an outstanding addition to your university and to your engineering program.

John indicates to me that he hopes to pursue engineering, and this is a wise choice for him. His work in my course evinced impressive depth and breadth of understanding in a variety of areas of thought, particularly the sciences. His contributions to a group research paper at the end of the first nine weeks represented his best work in my class, and evinced his ability to rationally assess information and synthesize it to form a coherent and convincing argument. In the paper, John argued for several alternatives to imprisonment for convicts diagnosed with mental illness, particularly psychopathy. He provided ample statistical support and analysis drawn from his extensive research, ultimately illustrating in convincing fashion that the current paradigm of imprisonment and high recidivism indicates a need for substantial change in the way the justice system addresses psychopaths. The argument he presented in the piece suggests his readiness for future research, and I would not be surprised to see him one day contribute to advances in his field.

The group research paper further showed me John's strength of character. He worked as a leader in the group, making sure each student participated, and each was properly credited for the work that they did. He carefully explained his statistical analysis to his group mates, so that they understood not just what he did, but why. John demonstrated that he would be an excellent addition to any team.

John is dedicated to, and diligent in, his studies. While he is certainly a capable student of English, he seems to be more naturally inclined to the STEM fields. He often had to work very hard in my class to maintain his high marks, but he did so admirably. At the end of the year, his hard work paid off as he earned a passing score of 3 on the AP English Language and Composition AP exam.

Beyond the classroom, John has gained a wealth of experiences that have readied him for rigorous postsecondary work. A man of the world, he has lived in seven countries all over the world and experienced considerable diversity in his travels as he learned to value such diversity. He developed his passion for engineering through ID Tech coding camps at Rice University, where he gained firsthand experiences in coding, video game development and robotics. He also interned at Code Park in Houston as a teaching assistant, providing educational opportunities in coding for underprivileged youth in the Houston area. John also volunteers at Colonial Oaks Senior Living, where, as he puts it, he is able to “help [his] community and give back to a generation that laid the path for [him],” and with the ATA Turkish Festival, through which he is able to celebrate help to raise awareness about his own culture.

Once again, I recommend John Doe with no reservations. If there is anything that I can do to further his candidacy, please do not hesitate to follow up with me via the contact information provided below.

This is not a brief letter, and it goes into great detail into who the student is, and what they have accomplished. This information comes from two sources: The teacher’s interactions with the student in class, and a brag sheet

Both of these sources are important, but serve different purposes. From the first, you can speak on how the student participates in class; their struggles and triumphs, how quickly they grasp material, their potential, and their diligence. These observations form the first two-thirds of the letter, and for good reason; this is information colleges can get from no-one except from you.

This information matters because grades only tell part of the story. A student who works very hard to turn a C into a B is very different from a student who is willing to coast at a B, instead of doing the work to get an A.

In the letter above, the teacher provides important context for John receiving a 3 on an AP English exam. While a 3 is nothing to be ashamed of, it is not as high as many students want. The teacher’s explanation of how John had to work hard in class all year to earn the 3 makes it seem like more of an accomplishment. By providing this context for your own student’s accomplishments, you can make the most of their

victories, even if they seem more modest on paper.

The paragraph where the teacher describes John’s character is short, but no less important. Colleges aren’t just looking for good scholars, but good people. Roommates who you can talk to late at night, classmates who will help explain the work, and students who will form a larger community. By including some lines about who your student is as a person, you can show colleges something they would never see otherwise, because being a good person doesn’t show up on a transcript.

The second to last paragraph covers the student’s achievements outside the classroom. Students should give you a brag sheet or resume which covers their extracurricular activities, if not, you should request them.

By briefly covering the activities, character, and accomplishments of a student, you corroborate their self-reporting, and make their achievements more significant in the minds of admissions officers. Official approval carries a great deal of weight, and your status as teacher makes your comments on what they have stated elsewhere much more impactful.

Example #2

To Whom It May Concern

To whom it may concern:

I am writing this letter of recommendation at the request of John Doe, who is applying for admission to your school, majoring in environmental engineering or economics and data science.

I have known John in my capacity as an AP Statistics teacher at Austin High School. Based on John’s grades, character and work ethic I would highly recommend him for admission to the university.

In class, John grasped the subject matter very quickly. He was able to adapt, work well with others and willing to participate. He would be an asset to any major and to any major where his statistics knowledge could be applied.

This letter does not do a good job of saying who a student was, nor what they did. The letter does speak highly of the student, but you could replace the student’s name and it would make no difference to the letter. This letter is not personalized, and does not do a good job of letting colleges know who John is, as a student or a person.

This is why your work here is so important. The first letter demonstrated what a diligent teacher can create: a letter which heightens a student, emphasizes their strengths, and helps them gain acceptance. This second letter does not hurt the student,

but neither does it help them. It says and does very little, and has equally little impact.

The first teacher did their due diligence, and used their full knowledge of the student to write an exemplary letter. You can’t have detailed knowledge offhand about every student, but with the help of brag sheets, you will be able to write strong letters for all of your students.

Saying No

You should know that not every student who asks you for a letter must be told “yes.” There are only so many hours in a day, and your time is valuable. The time required to write a good letter is not insubstantial, so some selection is needed when choosing which requests to fill. Further, you may not know every student well enough to write a good letter for them.

Submitting a form letter, or one which shows that you have no real relationship with a student, can hurt an application as much as a good letter can aid one. Thus if a student asks, but the best that you can say about them is “They were there,” you should politely turn them down.

There is also no shame in turning a student down if they ask too close to the deadline. Students who are prepared, and ask well in advance, are more respectful of your time.

