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## Letter of recommendation for scholarship from professor

Recommendation letters are given serious consideration by admissions officers. Considering college admissions get more and more competitive each year, recommendations can go a long way toward helping you get accepted (or, gulp, rejected). Most admissions committees seek a holistic view of the student. They want to know who you are, beyond the grades and test scores. A great recommendation letter both raves about your awesome qualities and opens a window into your personality and character. By knowing exactly why some recommendation letters are more powerful than others, you can figure out who you need to ask and what you need to do to get one. So what exactly makes some letters of rec more impressive than others? Let's take a closer look at the features of great recommendation letters and examples of each one. Your Letter Should Speak to Personal Qualities, as well as Academic Ability Whether your recommendation letter comes from a teacher, school counselor, or peer, it should speak to your personal qualities as well as your academic achievements. Admissions committees want to know more about you. They want to get a strong sense of who you are in terms of your personal strengths, personality, and interests. What motivates you? How do you communicate with your teachers and peers? How do you respond to challenges? What goals have you set for yourself, and what are you doing to work towards them? If this information sounds pretty personal, that's because it is. That's why you need to ask someone to recommend you who knows you well and can write a warm and insightful letter. You also shouldn't be afraid to tell your recommender what would go into your ideal letter. Would you like your English teacher to talk about your skill at writing and passion for poetry? Do you want your biology teacher to focus on your curiosity about the natural world? Let your recommender know what matters most to you. It will help her write her letter, and it will help you get a great reference to send to your colleges. Let's look at a few excerpts from strong recommendation letters that speak both to their students' intellectual capacity and personal strengths. This example is from an English teacher: From the first day of class, Mary impressed me with her ability to be articulate about difficult concepts and texts, her sensitivity to the nuances within literature, and her passion for reading, writing, and creative expression- both in and out of the classroom. She co-founded our school's literary club, where she publishes her poetry, something she hopes to continue in college and beyond. Mary's open and friendly nature has shone through in class, where she supports her peers and respects opinions even when they differ from her own. This letter begins to talk about Mary's intellectual insight, creativity, leadership, and respect for others. This next one is from a school counselor. Your school counselor may be in an especially good position to comment on what you bring to the school community and how you've grown over your time in high school (definitely a transformative four years). If there was a significant turning point, revelation, or challenge that affected you in the past few years, you should share it with your school counselor. When they talk about your capacity for growth, it also helps communicate to admissions officers a vision of what you'll accomplish in college and beyond. After exploring various electives in his first year of high school, Alvan discovered his great passion for photography. His work has been featured in school and community shows, and he volunteers at a local community organization teaching the basics of photography to children. While he started out high school a bit unsure of himself, Alvan has blossomed into a confident and self-directed individual with a strong voice that he expresses most powerfully through his art. Colleges want a student who will contribute to their community and achieve great things. That's why a strong letter will speak to your past achievement and how it predicts your future success. Some skills and qualities that especially impress admissions officer include strength of character, demonstrated leadership, and creativity. Your recommenders might talk about your honesty, integrity, courage, humor, thoughtfulness, maturity, cultural awareness, insight, or compassion for others. Your teachers may especially be able to discuss your skills of problem solving, analysis, foreign language, communication, or collaboration. This example focuses on Leila's maturity and cultural awareness. It's also made stronger by the fact that her recommender knows she's applying to study international relations. Leila has a maturity beyond her years, likely a consequence of her travels around the world. Having lived in Europe and South America before attending Lincoln High School, Leila shows an ease at adapting and making new friends. Her friendly nature, cultural awareness, and openness to other people and ways of life will serve her well in this exciting next chapter of her life. I'm looking forward to seeing all that she'll learn, contribute, and accomplish in her international relations program next year. Your letter is strongest if it comes from someone who knows you well and highlights your personal strengths. A letter that only lists out out grades, activities, and other facts and figures could be written by anyone with a copy of your resume. A personal letter shows that you've established good relationships with your teachers and will do the same on a college campus. Key Point Your recommendation letter should help admissions officers get to know you as a multi-dimensional person, even though they've never met you. It should speak to your personal qualities, as well as your academic ability. To get a personal recommendation letter, you should do two things. First, ask people who know you well. Second, tell your recommender what you'd like her to include in your letter and what values, goals, and experiences are most important to you. Just as you have to support your SAT or ACT essay with examples, your recommendation letter should give specific examples. Your recommender should describe an observation or interaction she had with you that illustrates something essential about your character. Let's take a look at what I mean when I say your recommendation letter can "show" and not just "tell." Your Letter Should Use Anecdotes and Examples Another reason it's a good idea to ask a recommender who knows you well is that she'll be able to give specific anecdotes and examples. If your letter is full of abstract statements, then it doesn't do much to paint a picture of you in the reader's mind. Your recommender should illustrate your strong points with meaningful stories. Consider these two examples: 1. Jen cares a great deal about other people. She's kind and a compassionate person. She's also a talented artist. Jen's caring nature and artistic talent are what make Jen special. 2. Jen combined two of her strongest assets - her artistic talent and deep empathy for others - to organize a coffeehouse style benefit. She coordinated with students and faculty to hold a night of student work and performances and raise money for a local homeless shelter. She even reached out to businesses in the community to donate food and equipment for the event. The intimate, inspiring event was a great success, and, thanks to Jen's vision and leadership, will be held again in the spring semester. Both examples seek to communicate the same personal qualities of Jen's: her artistic inclination and caring for others. But the first one gives no examples, and the reader doesn't know how the recommender knows this about Jenny or the extent to which it's true. She may care about others, but has that motivated her to act in some way that benefits those around her? The second example is specific, tells a story, and explains how Jen's values and interests manifest themselves in concrete action. Plus, it differentiates her from other students with a memorable and impressive story of her coffeehouse benefit. Don't worry if you're reading this and thinking, "But I've never set up a charity coffeehouse at my school." This is just one example. Even a small moment can take on great significance and communicate something essential about your values and character. As I mentioned above, if you can think of any specific experiences or challenges that were meaningful or taught you something about yourself, you should talk about them with your recommender. If your recommender knows you well, then she should also have specific examples that she can incorporate into her letter. Key Point Your letter should use meaningful, vivid stories and examples to demonstrate your outstanding qualities. If you have ideas, share them with your recommender. Your recommender can also include her own stories that reveal who you are and what kind of person admissions officers can expect to show up at their college. You can have a lot of input and control over what goes into your letter. At the same time, it's up to your recommender to make sure her letter is well written and error-free. A great recommendation letter should be clear and articulate. Your Letter Should Use Powerful Language As with any piece of writing, word choice in your rec letter for college is very important. Hopefully your recommender writes a letter that's focused, clear, and use strong and accurate adjectives. Rather than calling you smart, your recommender might talk about your innovative approach to solving problems. Rather than calling you a hard worker, it might say you're diligent and resourceful. Some other strong words insightful, analytical, curious, observant, mastery of specific subject area, creative, mature, flexible, generous, empathetic, leader, versatile, ethical, motivated, ambitious, and communicative. Words that are generic or cliché would weaken your letter, like "hard worker" who "goes above and beyond" and "always shoots for the stars." Your letter also shouldn't feature over the top enthusiasm, with words and phrases like "genius" or "superstar" with achievements "too amazing to be believed." Similarly, your letter shouldn't feature ambiguous wording or phrases that could be confusing or interpreted in an unflattering way. If it says you're "fiercely independent," this could sound a little harsh, like you don't always work well with others. If your recommender says you "lead by example," she could, intentionally or not, be suggesting a lack of leadership positions in the school. Finally, if your recommender focuses on your "tremendous potential" and "room to grow," an admissions officers might read between the lines that your recommender isn't too impressed with your progress so far. While these phrases aren't a red flag per se, they should be balanced out with other strengths and positive comments. Sometimes your recommenders will show you their letters before sending them, so you can look them over and politely offer any suggestions for revision. Other times, your recommender will keep the letter confidential. In this case, the best thing you can do is ask a teacher who has a reputation for writing well and putting effort into her letters. If you hear someone uses a form letter for everyone and just plugs students' names in, then avoid that person at all costs! Practically speaking, English teachers often get slammed with recommendation letter requests in the fall of senior year, because they're generally good writers. If you'd benefit from a letter from your English teacher, make sure to ask her early and talk to her about your ideas for your letter. Key Point Ask a recommender who can write well and will put in the time and effort to craft a thoughtful, error-free letter. Ask your counselor for advice, and make your request early so your teacher's quota for rec requests doesn't fill up. If you're applying to a selective school, like in the Ivy League, another feature that can make your letter stand out is a statement of high ranking. On the flip side, a statement of average ranking could be a dealbreaker and would best be left out. Your Letter Should Rank You Highly, or Not At All If you're applying to a selective or Ivy League school like Harvard, a statement of high ranking could stand out and impress admissions officers. Here are a few examples. Carla is without a doubt the most talented and driven student I've ever had the pleasure of teaching in my fifteen years at Roosevelt High School. Pablo is one of the top three students I've had in my AP Calculus class in the ten years I've been teaching it. Due to her impressive determination, effort, and intellectual curiosity, Alexis has risen to the top of her class. Statements like these are especially impressive if your teacher or counselor has been at your school for many years. Your ranking could also get more specific, like saying you have a top "aptitude for scientific inquiry," "curiosity for solving problems," or "sophisticated analysis and understanding of literature." Conversely, if your recommender says you're "above average" or "satisfactory," it sounds lukewarm and won't add much to your application. For a top school, a mediocre ranking like this could even sink your application to the bottom of the pile. Key Point A statement of high ranking from an established teacher or counselor is one feature that could help make your recommendation letter great. Finally, your recommendation letter should come from a qualified person whose opinion admissions officers will take seriously. Schools have requirements for who your recommendation letters should be from. You also should know who to ask and who not to ask. Your Letter Should Come From the Right Person I mentioned a few times that your letters of recommendation should come from teachers or counselors who know the student well. Readers can pick up on this pretty easily, from the depth of insight provided and how personalized your letter is. They should also come from the right people. For instance, more selective schools ask for two teacher recommendations and one school counselor recommendation. Other schools just want one teacher rec and one counselor rec. Dartmouth and Davidson are unique in that they want a recommendation from a peer. Does that mean you should ask any teacher you've ever had in high school? Definitely not. Usually the best rec letters come from junior year teachers, because they had you in class recently and for a whole year. Another good teacher is one that had you for more than one class or advised you in an after-school club. A freshman or sophomore year teacher would probably not be recent enough. Your recommenders will state who they are and how they know you in their introductions. That way admissions officers know to give their opinion serious consideration. These introductions might like look this: As Jim's 11th grade AP Chemistry teacher and academic advisor, I'm honored to provide him with this letter of recommendation to Dartmouth College. I had the pleasure of having Caitlin in my 11th grade English class and current Creative Writing class. From the first day of class, she impressed me with her insightful comments and advanced writing skills. I'm certain that Caitlin will continue to excel academically and creatively in her future, and I highly recommend her for admission to your undergraduate program. If you feel that you don't have any teachers who know you well enough (maybe your school has a huge student to teacher ratio), you might send in a supplemental recommendation from a supervisor, coach, community member, or other person who knows you well and who admissions officers will view as an official, trustworthy, and informed source. Key Point The strongest recommendation letters for college usually come from your junior year teachers or teachers who have had you in several classes or clubs (and thereby gotten to know you in more than one context). Freshman and sophomore year teachers probably aren't recent enough, and senior year teachers may not have had you in class long enough to know you well. Given that you'll likely ask junior year teachers for recommendations, go into junior year with a proactive mindset. Participate in class, get to know your teachers, and be open about your future goals. As we draw to a close, let's review the most important features that make for a great recommendation letter for college and what you can do to get one (or three)! What Makes a Great Recommendation Letter? Your recommendation letter should come from a recent teacher or other source who knows you well. Your letter should highlight your most important personal and academic strengths, as well as support them with examples. Rather than repeating your resume, it should focus on just a few key aspects of who you are as a student and person. To ensure that you get a great letter of rec, there are a few things you can do. First, ask a teacher who supports you and knows you well. Second, don't be afraid to give them information, both in the form of a "brag sheet" full of your self-reflections and by explicitly telling them what you'd like your letter to include. This is especially effective if you're applying to a specific major, like English, and want your English teacher to talk about your insightful analyses of literature. As long as you're thoughtful about who you ask and give some serious thought as to what you'd like your ideal letter to include, then your efforts should pay off with an impressive and memorable recommendation letter for your college application. What's Next? Now that you know what makes for a great recommendation letter, what about the flip side? What features make for a bad letter of rec? Read all about bad recommendations here. Do counselor recs differ from teacher recs at all? Read about what counselors should include in their reference letters as they support their students on the path to college. Want to improve your SAT score by 160 points or your ACT score by 4 points? We've written a guide for each test about the top 5 strategies you must be using to have a shot at improving your score. Download it for free now. 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