



## **Six Tips for Getting Great Letters of Recommendation for College**

Written by: Mark A. Montgomery, Ph.D.

One of the most important elements of your college application is the recommendation of a teacher. College admissions offices take these letters very seriously, and it is critical that you do your best to secure the best letters of recommendation possible.

Some students assume that there is nothing they can do to ensure that the letters are glowing testimonials. While you can't really expect to sit in the room looking over the shoulder of your teacher as he writes the letter, there are many things you can do to increase the likelihood that the teacher writes a strong letter that will impress admissions officers everywhere.

Here is a step-by-step guide for making sure your letters of recommendation (LORs) are the best they can be.

### **1. Get Organized**

Talk to your guidance counselor or the secretary in the guidance office to find out how the school handles teacher recommendations. At some schools, the guidance office will submit the teacher recommendations from your file to colleges directly, along with your transcripts and the school report. At other schools, teachers are requested to send LORs directly to the colleges. Some schools manage recommendations electronically through software packages like Naviance, while others are using functions on the Common Application. The point is that you must know the procedures at your school before you even get started. And you need to follow those procedures, so as to make the lives of your teachers and counselors as easy as possible. With some teachers writing dozens of letters each year, the more you can make things easy for your teacher writing your letter, your diligence and kindness will be reflected in their evaluation of you.

### **2. Decide Which Teachers Should Write your LORs**

A good LOR tells a good story about the applicant. The story reflects the strengths—and perhaps a few weaknesses—of the candidate. A good letter contains some details, some examples, some bits of information that bring the candidate to life for the reader. And a good letter might also provide information about the student's intellectual growth and development over time. Therefore you need to choose a teacher who knows you well to write your letter.

You also need to make sure that you choose at least one teacher in a core academic discipline. You are applying to college, not to a resort or a team or to a service club. Admissions officers want to know about your performance in and contributions to the classroom. If you like, you can add a second or third LOR from a band director, a coach, or the head of your youth group. These letters can help round you out as a person. But at least one LOR should be from an English, math, social studies, science, or foreign language teacher.

Finally, don't assume that you should choose the teacher in whose class you are performing the best. Nor should it necessarily be the teacher of your favorite subject. As noted earlier, you need to identify the teacher who knows your work, who can tell some good stories, and who can highlight your positive personal qualities.

### **3. Establish a Relationship with Your Teachers**

Well before you decide which teacher will write your LOR, you need to consider that a teacher will not know you very well unless you make an effort to get to know the teacher. Participate in class. Ask questions. Work hard. Go above and beyond what is required, to demonstrate your interest, your fortitude, your proficiency. Show up before or after school to ask questions, shoot the breeze, or comment about the course content. Express interest not only in the class, but in the teacher. Obviously, you will get along better with some teachers than with others. So focus your efforts on developing relationships with the teachers with whom you share some connection, some affinity.

### **4. Consider the Timing of Your Request for an LOR**

Teachers are busy people. Don't wait until the last moment to request an LOR. Don't ask right after your midterm or final exam—when they are still grading stacks of papers. Don't assume that teachers will write letters during school vacations (you don't want to work during vacations, and your teachers don't, either). Look at your own deadlines for your college applications, and consider requesting the LOR at least a couple of months before the deadline. Be considerate and respectful.

### **5. Pop the Question**

When you meet with your teacher to request an LOR, you will likely be nervous. Try not to worry. Teachers field these requests all the time, and they expect to be asked. Consider making your request after school or during a teacher's off period. Don't make the request via email or over the telephone. Do it in person: it makes a better impression. Your question can go something like this: "Ms. Baker, out of all my high school classes, I have enjoyed yours the most. I feel that I've learned a lot from you. I like the material we are learning, and I think you're a great teacher. I also think you bring out the best in me. I would like to ask whether you would be willing to write a strong letter of recommendation for me as I apply to colleges this year. Of all my teachers, I think you know me best, and I'd be pleased if you would write my recommendation." You want to be complimentary of the teacher, but you also want to convey a sense of pride in the work you have done in the class. Brown-nosing won't work. But if you have built a good relationship with this teacher, he or she will be delighted to give you an enthusiastic "yes," if you craft your request in this way.

## **6. Provide Your Teacher With Adequate Information**

After your teacher answers an enthusiastic “yes!” to your request, you should present him with a slim folder with everything the teacher needs to fulfill your request. The folder will contain a variety of documents (see below) that will help him in writing a detailed letter filled with anecdotes about your skills and abilities. Presenting this folder immediately will convey how seriously you take the teacher—and the recommendation. The folder should contain:

- Your resume
- Your personal statement, assuming you have completed it
- A short “statement of purpose” that outlines the sort of college you hope to attend and why you think that sort of college would be best for you. Write one or two solid paragraphs. Make sure to focus on the academic issues related to your college choice, so that the teacher can provide specific information to support your application.
- A full list of the colleges to which you are applying, including addresses, with application deadlines clearly stated. If you are applying to particular departments, scholarships, or other special programs, make sure to clarify that information for the teacher.
- The recommendation form or forms the teacher will need to complete (note this might be the form your high school uses, or it could be the form from the Common Application, or you might include the form from each individual college to which you are applying).
- If the letter is to be turned in to the school guidance office, include an envelope in which the completed letter can be sent to the guidance office.
- If the teacher has to send the letter directly to the college, include stamped, addressed envelopes for each college to which you are applying (make sure to clip these to the appropriate blank forms, to make it easy for the teacher to do the collating).
- Your contact information, including phone number, home address, and email address, in case the writer has any questions.
- A short note of personal thanks to express your appreciation.

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### ***How many recommendations do I need?***

As in so many things in life, the priority here is on quality, not quantity. Generally most colleges want one counselor recommendation and one teacher recommendation. I advise my students to obtain two solid recommendations from teachers. One should be from a teacher in a core subject (math, English, science, social studies, or foreign language). The second can be from another core teacher, or from an elective teacher who knows you well or in an area that the student hopes to pursue in college (a budding actor needs a letter from the drama teacher, for example). In some cases, a third letter from a coach, a youth

group leader, or some other adult who plays a significant role in the student's life may be included. Admissions officers spend a total of about seven minutes reviewing an applicant's file. A pile of letters that say essentially the same thing will be more of a hindrance than a help.

***My Dad knows Senator Longbottom from my state. Should I get him to write me a recommendation?***

Not unless Senator Longbottom knows you really well and can say something new, different, or eye-opening for the admissions committee that is not otherwise in your application. Gratuitous letters from bigwigs will not impress anyone. The admissions officers want to know first and foremost about your life in the classroom. Senator Longbottom is unlikely to have much to add on that score (unless he was your civics teacher before got himself elected!).

***Can I request a recommendation letter via email?***

No. Many high schools now have automated systems for requesting letters of recommendation. These are fine for processing and for making the lives of teachers and counselors easier. If your school uses such a system, you need to adapt your request to accommodate an electronic delivery system. But you should NOT request the recommendation this way. Make your request in person, then follow it up with the electronic request. A face-to-face request shows maturity and respect. An emailed request is wimpy.

***What if my teacher turns down my request?***

It happens very occasionally. Usually this happens only when a student does not carefully consider whom to ask in the first place. Reasons for rejection vary. Some teachers are too busy. Some teachers will not write letters for students they don't know well. And some teachers are brutally honest: they will not write a letter unless they can write a strong, supportive one. You have little choice to respect the teacher's decision and seek one from another. Don't despair, however; a teacher who turns you down would be unlikely to have written a good recommendation, anyway. Better to opt for your second choice than to get a letter that is weak or (worse) negative.

***Should I waive my right to see a letter of recommendation? Should it be strictly confidential?***

A confidential letter is best. Some teachers will provide you with a copy, anyway. But it is better for the admissions officer to believe that the teacher is not sharing his or her comments with you directly. The teacher, too, should feel comfortable about being honest in the recommendation. Often the strongest letters are actually ones that include a couple of insights into the student's relative weaknesses; these insights can help highlight a teacher's strengths (plus, a letter that goes on and on with nothing but superlatives really doesn't say much of anything). If you have chosen your recommender carefully, you need not fret that the letter will say something bad about you. So waive your right to see it, and give that letter an extra measure of weight in the eyes of the admissions officer who reads it.

***How can I build a better relationship with my teachers before I ask them for a recommendation?***

Thought it may seem somewhat surprising, teachers are human. They like it when students show an interest in them, and in what they are teaching. So engage with your teacher as a human, and as an instructor. Ask questions in class. Come after school or before school with a question (even if you know the answer—sometimes it helps just to get the teacher talking!). Express your thanks. On a day when you feel class was particularly good or the teacher was in fine form, tell her so. If you enjoyed a particular project or assignment, say so as you hand it in (don't wait to complain about the grade after it is returned). You want to be an eager, conscientious student. But you don't to be a tiresome brownnoser. If you find that you are forcing yourself to like the teacher or the subject matter, consider asking a different teacher to write your recommendation. Not only are teachers human, they are also able to smell a sycophantic toady a mile away.

***How can I thank the writers of my recommendations?***

As a former teacher, I'm tempted to say that you should buy them expensive gifts: Rolex watches come to mind. But the best form of gratitude is to act grateful. Write a thank you note (not an email—a handwritten note on a nice card) after you have confirmed that the colleges have received their letters. Make sure to let your recommenders know where you are accepted: run by their office between classes and share your good news, and say thanks for the recommendation. Write another nice note at the end of the year, just before graduation, to let them know how much you appreciate their help in getting you through high school and into college. And, if you really want to make a teacher's day, week, month, or year, send him a note or two from college. Let them know how you're doing. Share some good news. Relate what you are learning in college to something you learned in their classroom. Nothing warms a jaded teacher's heart like a genuine note of thanks from a former student.

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