Writing the Letter of Recommendation

Letter of recommendation hold substantial weight in college admission decisions. A well-written letter for an outstanding applicant can highlight impressive characteristics beyond his/her own self-advocacy. Colleges are looking for people who have and will make and impact—the difference between a letter that supports and a letter that raves about a special student.

Teacher evaluations are most helpful when they are specific and storied. They should provide us with the information and impressions we cannot gleam from the rest of the application. Try to give a complete sketch of the student and the context of his/her accomplishments. Support your conclusions with facts and anecdotes whenever possible. A story or incident that conveys the character or merit of the individual is more telling than a mere statement like “Mary is mature”.

Try to address the following questions in your evaluation:
* What is the context of your relationship with the applicant? If you do not know the applicant well and are only able to write a brief summary, please acknowledge this to us.
* Has the student demonstrated a willingness to take intellectual risks and go beyond the normal classroom experience?
  * Does the applicant have any unusual competence, talent or leadership abilities?
  * What motivates this person? What excites him/her?
  * How does the applicant interact with teachers? With peers? Describe his/her personality and social skills.
* What will you remember most about this person?
* Has the applicant ever experienced disappointment or failure? If so, how did he/she react?
  * Are there any unusual family or community circumstances of which we should be aware?

Pay special attention to the opening and closing of your evaluation. Remember, we are sometimes reading tens of thousands of applications and we appreciate strong statements that we’ll remember as we evaluate each candidate. With that said, please write in a way that makes you feel comfortable and do not shy away from giving us your honest impressions. We are only looking for glowing superlatives if they are backed with examples and give us context. Above all else, make sure to go beyond a student’s grades and academic performance. We can get this information from other parts of the application.
Teacher Recommendation Example 1

It is a great pleasure for me to recommend David for admission to XYZ. He is one of the most extraordinary students I have encountered in 20 years of teaching. I had David in A.P. Calculus last year as an 11th grader, and he was one of the students in an extremely able group of mostly seniors. He has a high aptitude for math and was very much involved in his work, applying himself with persistent dedication and often going beyond the regular class assignments.

David’s biding interest, however, is computer science. He has developed a series of “strands” for use in providing computerized drill and review in the basic skills and techniques of algebra and arithmetic, and has recently adapted these to other subjects. David’s work in this area has been so original and significant that he has published a paper on it and delivered several lectures to professionals in other parts of the country. This is a phenomenal accomplishment for anyone, especially a man in rural Arkansas. It is also worth noting that both last year and this year he taught computer programming to a tenth grade class of mine for two weeks. He took over completely, preparing lectures, assignments, and tests with great care and thought. His lectures were clear and well organized, and it was obvious that he expanded a great deal of effort to make the course the success that it was.

David’s personal qualities are as impressive as his intellectual accomplishments. An extremely kind, sensitive and sensible boy, he has had a difficult family situation. He provides emotional support to his mother through her battle with cancer without allowing the situation to undermine his own stability and accomplishments. He has exhausted all that we have to offer him in this small community, and the maturity that he has demonstrated leads me to believe he is ready for a college of your caliber. I sincerely hope you will offer him a place in your freshmen class!

Critique: Excellent! This recommendation is filled with comments from someone who clearly knows this student well. We get a clear sense for not only David’s intellectual capacities, but also emotional maturity. His genuine love for computer programming comes through in this teacher’s description. We also realize that he is pushing academic boundaries in his community and making opportunities for himself.

Teacher Recommendation Example 2

Jen was a student in one of my predominantly senior physics classes. She took physics her junior year in high school and was a good student. Through hard work she was able to develop a good understanding of the subject material.

Jen also had personal qualities that are commendable. In the two years that I have known her, I have never known her to be dishonest or untrustworthy. Once on an exam paper I had made a grading error in her favor. She brought this to my attention even though it resulted in a lower grade.
In conclusion, I feel that Jen has both the academic and personal qualities to be a credit to the college of her choice, and I give her my recommendation without reservation.

Critique: We receive thousands of recommendations like this each year. It is all positive, but it doesn’t give any real depth to the candidate. In this instance, the reader is left feeling the writer is reaching for something to say. Honesty and trustworthiness are certainly admirable traits, but they are not uncommon among the nation’s top college applicants. We are looking for a compelling reason to admit someone. Although Jen may be a hard worker, most of our applicants are too. Although the comments are positive, it is difficult to grasp onto anything tangible to make this candidate’s case stronger. Was this faint appraisal? How does Jen fare in comparison with other outstanding candidates at the school?

***The above information was taken from the MIT website on suggestions for teacher recommendations.

Optional Letter Template

1st Paragraph: Name of student, classes they had with you, year in school when they had you in class and the grade they received. Personalize this information.

2nd: Kind of work the student did in your class
a. Course they took  
b. Examples of paper topics  
c. Way student handled the course content  
d. Responsibility and reactions to criticism  
e. Strengths & weaknesses of student’s work

3rd: Behavior in class
a. How well were they prepared  
b. Enthusiasm for the course  
c. Oral discussion skills  
d. Student leadership role and how other class members reacted

4th: Extra-Curricular activities as you have observed them

5th: Personal traits of student-character strengths and any weaknesses

6th: Short, emphatic end with how strongly you recommend the student

The more unique you can make the student, the greater the chance they will get in or win a scholarship. A blanket statement not followed by an example will mean nothing to the reader. Always be honest, don’t overstate the student’s abilities/qualities.
Descriptors Colleges Look For In Recommendation Letters

**Achievement:** strives for a high achievement level
- Excels the norm
- Is a high achiever
- Excels in achieving outstanding results

**Analytical Skills:** displays strong analytical qualities
- Excels in mathematical calculations
- Excels in analytical thinking

**Communication Skills:** communicates clearly & concisely
- Encourages a free exchange of ideas
- Relates well to others
- Excels in verbal communications

**Cooperation:** works effectively with others
- Is extremely cooperative
- Builds strong relationships
- Cooperates with enthusiasm

**Creativity:** demonstrates a high degree of originality and creativity
- Displays active imagination
- Demonstrates imaginative insight
- Provides valuable insight
- Seeks creative alternatives
- Discovers new approaches
- Excels in developing new perspective
- Is clever & imaginative when confronted with obstacles
- Is able to develop creative solutions to challenging problems
- Is inventive
- Develops unique course of action
- Seeks new ideas & approaches
- Promotes the flow of good ideas
- Generates fresh ideas
- Displays a sense of inquiry
- Displays a strong power of observation
- Promotes a creative climate
**Decision Making:**  Makes decisions with confidence  
Is reliable in making sound decision  
Makes sound decisions under pressure  
Makes inventive and resourceful decisions  
Makes decisions based on sound logic  
Concentrates on developing solutions  
Develops fresh solutions

**Dependability:**  is consistent, dependable and accurate in carrying out responsibilities  
Displays industriousness, conscientiousness and dependability  
Accepts all responsibilities fully & meets deadlines  
Consistently punctual  
Able to achieve results despite obstacles  
Fulfills all commitments

**Goals:**  sets realistic goals  
Effectively develops goals  
Uses goals to maintain momentum  
An enthusiastic goal achiever  
Achieves and surpasses goals  
Sets high standards

**Initiative:**  demonstrates a high level of initiative  
Takes prompt and independent action  
Eager to take on new assignments  
Is energetic and enterprising  
Is a self starter  
Plans and organizes with little or no assistance  
Does things without being told  
Effectively initiates solutions  
Takes advantage of all opportunities  
Is alert for new opportunities  
Requires minimum supervision

**Innovative:**  Seeks innovative solutions  
Excels in proposing innovative practical skills  
Willing to implement new ideas and approaches  
Takes innovative steps to achieve results  
Displays strong innovative capabilities  
Very innovative with limited resources
**Interpersonal Skills:** Displays genuineness in dealing with others
- Recognizes the needs of others
- Demonstrates strong interpersonal skills
- Projects a pleasant demeanor
- Builds a climate of trust
- Excels in effective human relations
- Respects the opinions of others

**Judgement:** Weighs alternative courses of actions
- Is reliable in using good judgment

**Knowledge:** Displays a broad application of knowledge
- Is able to effectively apply knowledge
- Excels in dissemination of knowledge
- Excels in conveying knowledge to others
- Displays a strong understanding of relevant issues

**Leadership:** Projects self-confidence, authority and enthusiasm
- Successfully meets the position’s leadership challenge
- Demonstrates natural leadership ability
- Displays a strong ability to lead and direct
- Is a charismatic leader
- Dynamic leadership
- Leads with authority and respect
- Is motivating and inspiring
- Takes a leadership role in group situations
- Is emulated by peers
- Trusted leader
- Quick to gain the trust of others
- Inspires others to do their best
- Promotes teamwork

**Learning Skills** Receptive to new ideas
- Fast learner
- Displays a short learning curve
- Displays an exceptional ability to learn new methods
Loyalty  Displays unwavering dedication
       Extremely dedicated
       Strong loyalty
       Sense of purpose

Maturity  Displays a high degree of emotional maturity
       Maintains a mature attitude

Mental Skills  Exceptionally keen
       Grasps the most difficult concepts
       Displays a depth of understanding
       Displays fresh insights
       Displays fresh thinking
       Draws sound conclusions
       Sustains logical thinking
       Excels in intuitive thinking
       Excels in independent thinking
       Thinks strategically
       Displays a very high cognitive ability
       Displays an inquiring mind

Motivation:  Displays a strong incentive to succeed
       Strives for the achievement of excellence
       Strives for excellence at every opportunity
       Displays energy and vitality in performing daily assignments
       Displays high energy and drive
       Highly motivated inner drive
       Highly committed
       Strong competitive drive
       Maintains fresh enthusiasm
       Inspires enthusiasm
       Seeks greater challenges
       Generates positive attitudes
       Goes beyond what is expected
       Capitalizes on opportunities
       High energy
       Self Motivated
       Results oriented
Oral Expression  Eloquent speaker
   Inspiring speaker
   Communicates with ease
   Expresses ideas clearly
   Is highly articulate

Persuasive  skilled in gaining the support of others
   Excels in changing attitudes
   Very convincing
   Very influential
   Conveys a strong influence

Problem Solving  Demonstrates a strong ability to identify, analyze & solve problems
   Demonstrates cohesive solutions
   Creates satisfying solutions
   Displays an ability to solve problems, think, reason and learn
   Approaches problems from multiple points of view
   Decisive in handling problems
   Shows a strong ability to solve problems
   Excels in developing viable solutions
   Works well with others in solving problems
   Looks upon problems as exciting challenges
   Turns problems into opportunities

Resourceful  Demonstrates self reliance
   Capitalizes on personal strengths
   Makes maximum use of all resources
   Able to draw on a variety of resources to achieve results
   Effectively uses all sources
   Obtains additional resources when necessary

Responsibility  Honors all commitments
   Personally accountable
   Eager to seek challenges
**Stress**
copes effectively with adversity
Handles emergencies
Keeps situations in perspective
Performs well under pressure
Handles dilemmas with calmness
Remains calm under pressure
Displays impressive poise under pressure
Handles the unexpected
Maintains control in all situations

**Time Management**
Meets all deadlines consistently
Uses time productively
Uses time wisely
Schedules time effectively

**Versatile**
Highly skilled in multi tasking
Effectively handles concurrent assignments
Effectively handles special assignments
Flexible to change
Embraces change
Receptive to change

**Writing Skills**
accomplished writer
Writes clearly and effectively
Demonstrates creative writing ability
Writes with enthusiasm
Possesses a large vocabulary
Writes with original thoughts and ideas
Writes with persuasion
Skilled in writing on controversial subjects