

## 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 glean 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 11<sup>th</sup> 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**

- 1<sup>st</sup> 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.
- 2<sup>nd</sup>: 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
- 3<sup>rd</sup>: 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
- 4<sup>th</sup>: Extra-Curricular activities as you have observed them
- 5<sup>th</sup>: Personal traits of student-character strengths and any weaknesses
- 6<sup>th</sup>: 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

