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LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION GUIDELINES

Colleges often ask for two or three letters of recommendation to learn about you beyond your grades and test scores and gain insight into your personality and character.

Below are guidelines to help you develop and ask for your letters of recommendation.

Whom to Ask :

- Colleges typically ask for letters of recommendation from two academic teachers — sometimes in a specific subject — and a school counsellor or principal.
- Choose teachers from Class 11 or Class 12. Colleges want a current perspective on you, so a teacher from several years ago isn't the best choice.
- Consider asking a teacher who also knows you outside the classroom, for example, your Class Teacher or Co-Curricular Head.
- Additional letters of recommendation from other adults, including internship supervisors, coaches, music instructors, or project mentors can be an excellent way to supplement your application.
- Always ask a potential recommender if he or she would be comfortable writing a recommendation for you. It's a good way to avoid weak letters.

When to Ask :

- Make sure to give your recommenders at least one month before your earliest deadline to complete and send your letters. You should aim to ask them by the beginning of Class 12. Remember that some teachers will be writing dozens of letters, which takes time. Your teachers will do a better job on your letter if they don't have to rush.

How to Get the Best Recommendations :

To help your teachers, counsellors and mentors write effective letters of recommendation, you should provide them with bullet points that give positive, detailed information about your achievements and potential. Your bullet points should include specific examples or anecdotes and cover the following information:

I.For Academic teachers:

- How long they've known you, and the context of your relationship.
- Your academic performance, including high grades earned, or a high standing in your class or unit.
- Your in-class participation, including your contributions to class discussions and willingness to share ideas.
- Any projects or coursework of which you're particularly proud.
- What, within the subject, motivates or excites you.
- How you've applied what you've learned in class, and extended your learning beyond the normal classroom experience.
- How you've challenged yourself or demonstrated your passion for the subject.



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- How you've tackled difficult material and overcome any personal or academic challenges.
- Your intellectual curiosity, and potential to study the subject at the college level.
- Any exceptional skills, talents, or leadership ability.
- Your social skills, and how you interact with teachers and peers.
- Any extracurricular activities that the teacher would be familiar with, or related to the subject.

II. For Counsellors/Principals:

- How long he or she has known you.
- Your overall academic performance and rank – across all subjects and years, and where you stand relative to the rest of your class.
- If applicable, explain any low grades in your transcript, such as drop-in Class 11 marks. Explain why you had difficulty and discuss how you've improved since then.
- How you've challenged yourself in and out of the classroom.
- How you have reacted to instances of disappointment or failure.
- Any unusual adverse circumstances that you've overcome.
- Academic and Extracurricular Awards and Honours you've won.
- What you've contributed to the school through leadership roles, extracurriculars, legacies you've left, etc.
- What you've contributed to the surrounding community.
- Your commendable skills and traits, and how you've demonstrated them.
- What makes you stand out from the rest of your class, or makes you memorable.
- What you will be able to contribute to a college community. Examples that speak to your ability to succeed in college and in the future.

III. For Additional Recommenders (i.e. project mentors, coaches, internship supervisors, etc.):

- The length and context of your relationship.
- Details of the project/internship you worked on with them.
- Why this work is significant in a broader context.
- Your specific role in the project.
- What exceptional skills/qualities you brought to the project work.
- How you were able to apply and extend your learning during the course of the project/internship.
- Your potential to succeed in college and in the future.

Final Tips:

- For all recommenders, be sure to include specific examples of your work, and anecdotes that epitomize your ability, character, and persona.
- Waive your right to view recommendation letters on your application forms. Admissions officers will trust them more if you haven't seen them.
- Follow up with your recommenders two or three weeks before recommendations are due to make sure the letters have been sent.



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EXAMPLE LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION AND CRITIQUES

SOURCE: [HTTP://MITADMISSIONS.ORG/APPLY/PREPARE/WRITINGRECS](http://MITADMISSIONS.ORG/APPLY/PREPARE/WRITINGRECS)

EXAMPLE 1

Teacher Recommendation for David:

It is a great pleasure for me to recommend David for admission to MIT. He is one of the most extraordinary students I have encountered in 20 years of teaching. I taught David A.P. Calculus last year as a tenth grader, and he was one of the very top 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 persistence and dedication and often going beyond the regular class assignments.

David's abiding 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 young man in rural Arkansas. It is also worth noting that both last year and this year David 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 had expended 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 for a few years now. 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 him capable of entering college a year early, as he now plans to do. I sincerely hope that you will be able to offer him a place in MIT's freshman class.

Critique:

Excellent! This recommendation is filled with comments from someone who clearly knows this student well. We get a clear sense of 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 - a trait that is especially important for a candidate seeking college admissions a year early.



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EXAMPLE 2

Teacher Recommendation for Jen:

Jen was a student in one of my predominately 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 favour. She brought this to my attention even though it resulted in a lower test 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, so information on the class material does not help the candidate. Although Jen may be a hard worker, most of our applicants are. Although the comments are positive, it is difficult to grasp onto anything tangible to make this candidate's case stronger. Was this faint praise intentional? How does Jen fare in comparison with other (more outstanding?) candidates at the school?

EXAMPLE 3

Guidance Counselor Recommendation for Mary:

Mary has contributed to the school community in a variety of ways, most notably through her participation in the newspaper and yearbook staffs. Frankly, I am impressed with her aggressiveness, creativity, determination and ability to schedule extracurricular activities around a full academic workload. I have never heard Mary complain about her workload or refuse any assignment that she has been given. It is not adequate to say that she accepts responsibility readily. She seeks responsibility. Oh, for more such students!

As business manager for the paper and co-editor of the yearbook for the past two years, Mary has done an outstanding job. She personally brought the town's business community from the view that the school newspaper was a charitable organization to the realization that the paper is a direct pipeline through which advertisers can reach students. She also took the initiative to set up the advertising rate schedule for the paper that produced enough revenue to expand coverage from a four-page paper, so that it is an eight-page and often twelve-page paper. Her work as a photographer for both publications has been equally outstanding.

Her motivation is not forced upon her, nor does she wear it like a badge. She has tremendous self-discipline. Mary is also a dedicated, versatile and talented student who will be an asset to your undergraduate community. She has my respect and my highest recommendation.



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Critique:

Good. Lots of specifics here give us a very clear impression and help us to know why that impression is held. We have evidence of her newspaper directives and overall character.

EXAMPLE 4

Guidance Counselor Recommendation for Jane:

Jane is an outstanding young woman whose academic record may not fully reflect her ability. Her parents were divorced during her junior year, and, for several years before that, her home situation had been in turmoil with a great deal of fighting between her parents. Her father has an alcohol problem, and Jane certainly endured a great deal of emotional distress. The fact that she has been able to do as well as she has done given the circumstances says a lot about her. Now that the home situation has stabilized, her performance has improved. I believe her senior year grades are a much better reflection of her ability.

Critique:

You may wonder whether or not the above information is appropriate in a letter of evaluation. It is! We appreciate anything that gives us insight and perspective into a student's performance and the environment. Comments about problems that a student has experienced will help us understand the context in which they have accomplished whatever they have achieved. The extent to which they have dealt with these problems is useful to know as well.

EXAMPLE 5

Guidance Counselor Recommendation for Mike:

I do not really know Mike very well. He has come to me for routine matters but generally has not had any problems that he has discussed with me. In this large school, I do not always have the time to personally get to know each of my advisees. From the comments I get from Mike's teachers, I have the impression that he is one of the strongest students this school has seen.

Critique:

We do not learn very much from this report, but we understand why. The counsellor is very honest, and we are not left guessing as to the reason there is not more information and will turn our attention to other parts of the application.

EXAMPLE 6

Teacher recommendation for Brian:

Brian was in the top five in my class consistently. He is certainly motivated to study. His character and personality are admirable. Brian is an excellent student, a hard worker and has above average reasoning ability.

Critique:

This is an example of an evaluation in which we really don't know what the writer is trying to tell us. The comments provided certainly do not give much substantive information. We are left wondering whether there is just not much to say about this student or whether the teacher just didn't bother to put much effort into the recommendation. This is a situation where we will probably form our impressions based on the pattern of all the recommendations. If all are equally uninformative, we will assume there wasn't much to say, but if the others are better, we will assume this teacher did not give much effort to the recommendation.