

Writing Letters of Recommendation: Helpful Hints for Teachers

Letters of recommendation are frequently high-stakes for students, serving as their tickets to college admissions, awards, scholarships, and other honors and opportunities. Here are some hints to give your best students a competitive edge.

- ❑ Letters of recommendation should be written on school letterhead. Stapling a sheet of letterhead to the back of your letter does not count!
- ❑ Include a line or two about how you know the student (in what capacity) and how long you have known the student.
- ❑ If there are rubrics available, use those as a guideline for your comments. For example, if the student will be evaluated on personal character or leadership skills, be sure to include evidence of those in your letter, so the student can earn those scoring points from the review committee.
- ❑ Give specific, concrete examples of the student's strengths or skills that are relevant to the application. "Comes prepared to class" or "turns in assignments on time" do not provide adequate information about academic abilities or talents.
- ❑ Try to match your recommendation to the program or purpose for the letter. A letter for a college scholarship may need quite a different focus than a letter for a summer drama workshop.
- ❑ Be generous on checklists and rating scales. It is usually better to err on the side of the student. You would not want a student to lose an opportunity just because you thought "usually" means 95% of the time, and other teachers interpreted it as 50% of the time.
- ❑ Don't "damn with faint praise!" A less than passionate letter may be read as a less than enthusiastic recommendation.
- ❑ If the request for a letter comes with directions, follow the directions carefully. Don't penalize a student for your mistakes. Evaluators have been known to toss out or refuse to read the second page of a letter that was supposed to be only one page long.
- ❑ Pay attention to the length of your letter. A student will likely earn more points from the review committee if there is plenty of specific information with examples to support your praise. On the other hand, you should be able to convey the important points in one full page, or two pages at most. A three-sentence paragraph is usually not sufficient.
- ❑ If you are writing letters for more than one student, be aware that the reviewer may compare the letters. Identical letters about "my favorite student" lose credibility quickly.
- ❑ Be careful that your letter does not try to tell the review committee what to do. You are not making the decision for the committee; you are just presenting information to allow the student to compete.
- ❑ Whether you are a band teacher, a coach, or an AP English teacher, grammar counts. Proofread carefully!

Remember that letters of recommendation may follow the student for a long time, and that many people may read them. They can be a reflection on your professionalism as well as on the student's skills. Be supportive but honest.