

A photograph of a male teacher with grey hair, wearing a light blue shirt and a striped tie, sitting at a wooden desk. He is looking up and to the left, holding a blue pen over an open book. Three students are standing around him: a young woman on the left with long brown hair, wearing a grey sweater and jeans, holding a notebook; a young man in the background wearing a light blue shirt; and a young woman on the right with long brown hair, wearing a grey t-shirt and jeans, also holding a notebook. The background is a library with yellow bookshelves filled with books.

Guide to Teacher Recommendations Covid 19 edition

Teacher Recommendations:

It used to be that students were advised to make an appointment with their teachers after school to request, in person, a letter of recommendation. But now... it does seem like that is the preamble to much of our virtual advice... students must request their letters of recommendation through email. Students need to put more effort into their request emails. It's important for them to share why they have selected this specific teacher and how their class impacted them. Letters of recommendation carry varying weight, depending on the perspective of the college or university and who writes them. The more selective colleges may ask for two or three recommendation letters. Questions abound: Who should you ask? What are they used for? Where do they go? When should you ask? Why are they important? And, how do you prepare your recommenders to write the best letter possible?

Who should you ask?

Letters of recommendation are the most powerful when they are written by teachers, coaches, club or internship advisors, youth group advisors or employers who know you well. The people you ask should be able to describe your skills and your accomplishments as well as your personality. Colleges prefer letters from junior year teachers since they are the most familiar with your most recent work. Read instructions carefully since some colleges may specifically request a science or math teacher, especially if you're applying to an engineering program.



What should they say?

Since most letters of recommendation are glowing and full of praise for the applicant, colleges that take them seriously are trying to get beneath the surface of who you are. The letters that share personal anecdotes about you reveal the less tangible qualities that a college can't deduce from grades and test scores. A well-written letter of recommendation will showcase your abilities and make you a compelling candidate.



Where should they go?

There are over 650 colleges that are members of the Common Application. It's likely that most, if not all, of your schools will request that letters of recommendation are sent electronically. Follow directions carefully and don't send more than a college requests. Colleges who participate in the Common Application detail how many letters of recommendation they require and how many they allow from teachers and non-teachers.

When should you ask for recommendations?

It is best to ask teachers in the spring of junior year if they are willing and able to write a letter on your behalf. If they say "yes", then ask them about their preferred timelines. Some teachers like to take care of the letters over the summer and others want a true summer vacation. If you have colleges with early deadlines (October 15 and November 1), make sure you provide your recommenders with at least a month's time to write the letters.



Why should you have letters of recommendation?

Letters of recommendation and essays are the two most powerful subjective characteristics of a student's application. Think about it, if two students present similar statistics (grades and test scores) and colleges need to accept just one of the students; letters of recommendation can often be the critical tipping factor. Colleges want to know how a student has contributed to the classroom, are they respectful of others' opinions, do they reach out to help their peers, are they leaders in class discussions and group projects, etc.

How do you get a really great recommendation?

The more information you provide your recommender, the better the letter will be. I suggest that all students prepare an Activity Resume or a Brag Sheet that details the following items: extracurricular activities; community service involvement; leadership positions; honors, scholarship and awards; employment; internships and job shadowing experiences and what you've done during your last three summers. Make sure you focus on your responsibilities and accomplishments in the resume so that teachers will be able to capture some of those details in their letters.



MUST DO'S!

Be certain to waive your right to view recommendation letters on your application forms. Admission officers will trust them more if you haven't seen them.

Send a confirmation email to your recommenders thanking them for agreeing to write your letter of recommendation and being specific about next steps.

Send thank you notes once you know the colleges have received the letters of recommendation.

Check with your high school counseling office to see if there is an official form that your high school requires you to complete, prior to requesting a letter of recommendation

Sample Email request for a recommendation

***Normally this would be done in person but due to Covid 19 an email is acceptable**

Dear (Insert Teacher Name),

I am currently in the process of working on my college applications. I have some deadlines in about three months and am trying to be proactive and organized. That's why I am writing you, normally I would make an appointment and speak to you in person, but due to Corona virus I am emailing you. Of all the teachers I've had, I think you know me the best, and I'm wondering: Would you be willing and able to write me a strong letter of recommendation?"

If you agree, I'll email you all the relevant information — my resume, my list of colleges and their deadlines, and some bullet points with stuff I've done in class.

Thank you for your consideration,

(Your name)