

Letters of Recommendation – Step by Step!

K. di Carlo, WYWLA Dean of Students

Letters of recommendation can be powerful components of your college and scholarship applications; hopefully you have been diligently working to cultivate meaningful relationships with your teachers, counselor, club advisors and work supervisors. A well-written letter of recommendation can give insight into how you work with others, your leadership and service styles, and how you can potentially contribute to the classroom and campus life of your college.

1. Do you actually need a letter of recommendation for the colleges that you are applying to?

Many colleges do not require a letter of recommendation; check the application instructions and undergraduate admissions websites of each college to which you will apply to see if they require letters.

If a college does not require a letter of recommendation, you can still choose to send a supplementary letter of recommendation with your application; however, there is not a guarantee that the admissions office will read this letter or take it into consideration since it is not an application requirement.

If your college does require a letter of recommendation, or you would like to send a supplementary letter, proceed to Step 2.

2. Yes, my college does require a letter of recommendation. Who should I ask to write a letter?

First, determine how many letters of recommendation a college requires – most colleges will require 1-2 letters of recommendation.

Many colleges will stipulate who should write these recommendations; often, they ask for letters from core academic teachers who know you well.

If colleges do not stipulate who should write a letter, I still recommend that you select a core academic teacher who knows you well. Remember, this letter is painting a more complete picture of who you are beyond the numbers and letters of a transcript. Can this teacher speak about your passion for the subject material, classroom participation, and/or your willingness to help your peers in class? If so, this teacher could be a good fit.

***Important Note: It can be tempting to ask the principal or a leadership figure in the community for a letter.** Titles do not impress admissions officers, unless this is a person with whom you have worked incredibly close and can speak to a particular aspect of your work ethic or personality that a teacher cannot address in a letter.

3. How are letters of recommendation submitted?

Letters of recommendation for college can be submitted electronically or through a hard copy in the mail.

If you are submitting college applications using the **Common Application**, you will be prompted to enter in your teacher's email address. Your teacher will then receive an email with instructions on how to send your letter of recommendation. Your teacher will electronically submit your recommendation.

If your application instructions ask you to mail in a letter, or if you are sending in a supplementary letter, you will need to provide your teacher with a **stamped and addressed envelope** in which to enclose your letter. Your teacher will also need to seal the flap of the envelope. Your teacher can either drop the envelope in the mail, or you can pick up the letter and mail it yourself – It is up to your teacher.

4. ASK your teacher for a letter of recommendation. Don't tell him or her, or assume that he or she will write a letter.

In most cases, teachers are more than happy to write you a letter of recommendation (and, hint: You should not be asking a teacher who you are not sure of what his or her reaction might be!)

With that being said, please do your teachers the courtesy of politely asking them to write a letter of recommendation for you. **DO NOT** enter in your teacher's email address into Common Application before you have asked him or her; teachers do not like getting surprise emails from Common App before they have heard from the student.

5. How to I ask a teacher for a letter, and what materials should I provide a teacher to help him or her in writing a letter?

- If possible, ask a teacher in person instead of through email. Find a quiet time before or after the school day. Asking in person gives you an opportunity to have your materials ready to hand him or her if and when they say "yes."
- Give your teachers at least two weeks' notice! For the most part, teachers are writing letters of recommendation after school hours or on the weekends, and

many teachers receive multiple requests for letters, particularly around early and regular decision deadlines.

- Your teacher knows you very well in the classroom, but what about outside of the classroom? **You need to provide your teacher with an updated copy of your resume that includes academic achievements and honors, extracurricular activities and work experience.** It is also helpful to include a description of what you are interested in majoring in and your intended career path.
- Give your teacher explicit instructions on how to send your letter. If you are using Common Application, let them know to expect an email from Common Application in the coming days. If they need to submit a hard copy, have your stamped and addressed envelopes in hand and ready to go.
- A week after your initial request, follow up with your teacher to see if he or she needs any additional information from you. You can also use this opportunity to gently remind them of the deadline.

6. Thank your teacher!!!

Make sure to follow up with a thoughtful thank you to your teacher. Your teacher has spent a great deal of time writing a letter for you and has probably written this letter at home or over the weekend on her own time. A handwritten note of appreciation goes a long way and is more thoughtful and personal than an email.