

Letter of Recommendation Tips

By TheCollegeEssayGuy

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

First things first. Find out which schools on your list require a teacher letter of recommendation for college (or two! or three!), and [which deadlines you're pursuing](#): Early Action, Early Decision, Regular—some will be earlier than others.

HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT TEACHERS FOR A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

In an ideal world, you'd ask someone who teaches a core subject (English, math, science, social studies), who taught you recently (junior year is prime) and who knows you well and actually likes you. If you can't find one person who fits all of those things, this is what you should prioritize:

1. Someone who knows you well and actually likes you
2. Someone who taught you recently
3. Someone who teaches a core subject*

As you think about which teachers to ask, here's an exercise, adapted from our colleague Stacey Picket Cunitz, that can help strengthen both their eventual recommendations and your understanding of what they'll be doing.

Step 1: Grab paper and pencil, or open a new doc for notes...

Step 2: And then [open this up](#).

That's the Common App's Teacher Recommendation Form.

Step 3: Take some time and imagine how your teacher/s might fill it out for you.

- With the "What are the first words that come to mind...?" identify and jot down both what you think comes to your teacher/s' minds, and the words you *want* to come to mind (are there differences?).
- With the "ratings" section, what are your strengths? What could you improve on?
- What are concrete, actionable steps you could take to improve? And what are actions you could take, with integrity, to shift the words that come to their minds?

Note that this exercise is useful to work through regardless of how much time you have before your letters or rec are due, but if you want to be able to act on that final bullet point, you'll probably want a few months to be able to shift your actions appropriately.

RECOMMENDATION LETTER TIPS

1. **Actually ask.**

Don't just add your teacher's name to your Common App. When I was a senior in high school, a guy went around telling people we were going to prom together without asking me. Yeah, no. This is just as bad. I told students who did that "no" on principle.

2. **Ask in advance.**

I mean *way* in advance—like, end-of-junior-year advance, if possible. Three weeks before the application deadline should be your minimum, and even that's pushing it. Martin Walsh, former assistant dean of admission at Stanford, recommends a 90-day heads' up. A rule of thumb: The more time you give your teachers, the more they will love you and the better your letter will turn out.

3. **Ask in person.**

An email ask should be a last resort. Be bold, young grasshopper! If you or they have moved, and asking in person isn't possible, opt for the phone call first, email second, text never.

4. **Don't group-ask the teacher.**

Make sure you ask one-on-one. Once I had two students ask me for a letter of rec at the same time, so I felt obligated to tell them both yes—how awkward would it have been if I'd told one yes and one no?

(Pro tip: This is *not* how you want your teachers to feel as they're writing your letter.)

5. **Handle the print submissions.**

While this isn't the norm, some schools still want you to snail mail your letters of rec. If that's the case, it's *your* responsibility to provide the teacher with a stamped envelope addressed to the admissions office of the relevant college.

6. **Know your teachers (and school counselors on behalf of your teachers) may have their own process—and follow it.**

For example, they may have their own questionnaire for you to fill out (and they might tell you to fill it out immediately). Whatever it is, follow through and respect their timeline.

7. **Prepare to return in kind.**

The more you ask of a teacher, the more you should plan to give them in return. These rec letters—especially the good ones—can take three hours to write. And the thing is, teachers don't *have* to write these letters. They don't get paid for them. They do them out of kindness and care on top of their other work. At the very least, plan to write thank-you notes.

WHEN TO ASK FOR A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

As mentioned above, ideally you'd ask for letters of recommendation at the end of your junior year (and you would, after doing the exercise above, spend a few months before the end of your junior year establishing a stronger relationship with them).

To keep it simple, the sooner your application is due, the sooner you need to ask.

But be sure to ask at an appropriate time. You know how you wait until your parents are in a good mood before you ask them for something? **Do that with this.**

That means: Don't ask your teachers during lunch. (They're humans. They eat.)

Not right before class. (You'll interrupt their class-prepping mojo.)

Not in the middle of class (just, no).

Two better options for when to ask for a letter of recommendation:

1. **Schedule a brief meeting with your teacher in advance.**

Shoot them an email asking if they have five minutes to chat with you about college sometime in the next week, then set up a time and don't be late. The thoughtfulness will add another jewel to your crown in Letter of Recommendation heaven.

2. **Wait until all the students have left the classroom at the end of the day, and cautiously approach the teacher, as you would a wild animal.**

Here's a sample dialogue that works:

You: "Ms. Smith, do you have five minutes to talk?" *(This is key. You're inviting her into the conversation, while also giving her a quick out if she needs one.)*

Ms. Smith: "Sure, Johnny. What's up?"

You: "Well, I'm in the throes of applying to college. I've got some deadlines in about three months, so I'm trying to be proactive and organized before all hell breaks loose. *(She'll love you for thinking ahead.)*

That's why I'm here. 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?" (*The word "strong" gives teachers a polite out if they feel like they don't know you well enough or don't have time to take on your letter.*)

Ms. Smith: "Oh Johnny, I thought you'd never ask." (*She probably won't say this, but you can dream.*)

You: "Really? That would be wonderful/epic/lit. Tonight 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. (*See below for more info on this follow-up email.*) Is there anything else you'd like from me?"

Ms. Smith: "Wow, no, I think that about covers it. Thanks, Johnny."

You: "Thank you, Ms. Smith!"

(*Turns away, nearing the door. Stops as if remembering something, turns back toward Ms. Smith with a winning smile.*)

You: "Oh, Ms. Smith! I almost forgot to ask ... what's your favorite coffee shop?"

Ms. Smith: "Oh heavens. Starbucks, I think. Why?"

You: "No reason! Have a great day!"

THE FOLLOW-UP EMAIL: WHAT TO SEND YOUR TEACHER AFTER ASKING FOR A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

Now you know how to ask for a letter of recommendation.

But you aren't finished yet.

Once you've had That Conversation, you need to do one more thing *the very same day*: Write your teacher a follow-up email.

A teacher's brain is like a very smart bowl of spaghetti: If you don't put your conversation down in writing, it might get lost in a thick vat of garlic and marinara.

For this follow-up email, you'll need these things:

1. A heart of gratitude. Seriously.
2. [This completed questionnaire](#) about yourself. Be detailed. Your teacher will love you for it.
3. An up-to-date, professional resume. Don't have a resume? [Read this blog post on writing a killer one](#) (or if you need a template).
4. A list of the colleges that will need your teacher's letter of recommendation, and each college's application deadline. (This part is in the questionnaire!)
5. A brief paragraph about what you hope to study, and any relevant life dreams, etc. (This part is also in the questionnaire!)

Here's a good example:

SUBJECT: Letter of recommendation follow-up (Deadline: Nov. 15)

BODY:

Dear Ms. Smith,

I hope this email finds you well.

First of all, thank you. It means a lot that you're writing me a letter. To make the process smoother, I've included my current resume, as well as the attached questionnaire to remind you of all my amazing qualities (hehe). Otherwise, here's what you need to know in brief:

- I'm applying to the University of Texas, Stanford and USC.
- **All three schools have a deadline of Nov. 15**, so you've got plenty of time.
- I hope to study mechanical engineering with a minor in philosophy regardless of where I end up, but Stanford is my No. 1 because I'd get to take classes at the [d.school](#) to supplement my studies.
- My dream job: NASA.

That's it! Again, thank you, thank you for doing this for me. Please let me know if there's anything else you need, or if you have any follow-up questions. And, if it's okay with you, I'll probably send a check-in email maybe a week or two before the deadline to make sure all is well.

In the meantime, I hope you have a beautiful day!

Sincerely,

Johnny D.

A final important tip: After you've requested a letter of recommendation, at some point in the application process you'll need to **waive your FERPA rights**.

What's FERPA?

It's a law that, among other things, protects your rights as a student to view your own education records. If you waive those rights on the app, it means you won't be able to see what your teachers write about you, which basically frees them up to write whatever they like.