

A recommendation is a formal piece of writing. As such, it has many things in common with the college application essay. The purpose of the letter is to endorse the student; therefore, the letter must be lucid, well-structured, and specific.

## **The Makings**

### *Structuring your letter*

A recommendation letter that is not well-structured is a detriment to the student's application and diminishes the credibility of the recommender. The structure of the recommendation letter should be similar to an essay's. It should include an introduction, 1-3 body paragraphs, and a conclusion. The recommendation letter should not be longer than one page.

### *Introduction*

The introduction should start with a statement of purpose. This statement should include something along the lines of, "I am writing to you in support of [student's name here]'s application." From there, you can summarize two or three of their strong traits which will be referenced later in the topic sentence(s) of the body paragraph(s).

### *Body*

If you have known the student for a long time and can think of many qualities that you would like to endorse, you may want to use two or three paragraphs. If there are one or two positive trait(s) that you would prefer to highlight, you may use just one paragraph. Do not assume that the more qualities you list, the stronger your letter will be. Colleges are looking for "spiky" students that have a few key strengths that will contribute to the diversity of their well-rounded student population. Pick a few strong attributes that you can back up with good evidence. A body paragraph must begin with a topic sentence which introduces the positive attribute that you intend to write about. The rest of the paragraph should be dedicated to supporting evidence (1-2 sentences) and introspection (2-3 sentences).

### *Conclusion*

This is the “so what?” section. Explain how the mentioned characteristics are valuable in a potential student. Conclude the letter by affirming your own positive impression of the student and your belief in his or her potential to succeed.

### *Coming up with content*

Start with a list of the student’s strongest attributes. It often helps to have the student complete a self-assessment. Have the student write his or her three strongest qualities and three weakest qualities. By no means should you use this as your only resource; this is meant only to help trigger your memory. Keep in mind that colleges are seeking driven, goal-oriented, hard-working, involved, and impactful students.

After you come up with positive traits that you are willing to endorse, supply 1-2 sentences of supporting evidence for each trait. Give concrete examples of instances where the student exhibited these traits.

Be careful not to be vague. Avoid words like “always” or “good at.”

Hyperbolic praise of your students will come off as disingenuous. Instead, let your students’ accomplishments and qualities speak for themselves in your writing. Does the student possess leadership qualities as a team captain? If so, was there one specific game where they boosted morale and changed the team’s attitude? Even if the student displayed his or her strengths on numerous occasions, only a few are necessary to back up your claim.

Once you cite examples that support your topic sentence, you must include analysis. In a recommendation letter, you must write about how the student’s positive traits will enable him or her to be successful with his or her career and academic ambitions. This is the most important part of the recommendation letter. Your goal is to make your student’s qualities seem as valuable as possible to the university.

## **In a Nutshell:**

### **Do**

- Make sure you that dedicate a lot of time to this letter and submit it on time. A student is asking you to contribute to their application to the school of their dreams. If you do not have the time to write the letter, allow them to find someone else who does. Most colleges will not consider the application process to be complete until recommenders submit their letters.
- Show, don't tell. Use examples to back up your claims.
- Be specific.
- Be resourceful. Ask your students for a self-assessment. You can also use online editing resources (such as EditRevise) to ensure that you submit the best possible recommendation.
- Proofread. Even the most articulate and positive recommendation letter can be dismissed for an egregious spelling error. You do not want to submit anything that will ruin your credibility.

### **Don't**

- Write a recommendation letter on behalf of a student whose qualities you do not want to endorse. Some teachers do this because they do not want to hurt the student's feelings. The result is a poor recommendation letter and damage to the recommender's own reputation.
- Be vague. This often comes across as a subtle hint at the student's inadequacies. Be specific.
- Be generic. Do not say about your student what you might say about every student. If you can copy and paste your recommendation letters to fit many applicants, you are not strongly endorsing the student. Remember that admissions officers read hundreds of applications and recommendation letters—so do not say something that will be found in every other letter.
- Lie. This might be obvious, but you do not want to lie or even exaggerate in a letter of recommendation. If a lie is discovered by college officials (remember that some schools have an interview process and ask for a personal essay), it will damage both your own and your student's reputation. If you have trouble coming up with good recommendation material, consult the student or other professionals who have worked with him or her.

Hopefully this guide will help you to give your student an excellent recommendation. To further guide you, we have attached a recommendation letter template for you to use as a reference.

**Example:**

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to you in support of [student's name here]'s application. [Briefly explain your relationship to the student and the context in which you have had the opportunity to examine his or her character.] [List his or her positive traits (a), (b), and (c) here.]

[Topic sentence introducing positive trait (a)] [1-2 sentences of supporting evidence that includes concrete and specific examples of when the student exhibited positive trait (a)]

[Introspection on positive trait (a), explaining how this trait will make the candidate an excellent student at this potential university and eventually successful in his or her career.]

[Here, repeat the above formula for trait (b)]

[If necessary, spend another paragraph on a third trait (c)]

[This is the conclusion. Now, answer the "so what?" question. Briefly summarize your introspective points and talk about the student's potential and his or her capabilities.] [Finally, reiterate your support of the student's application.]

Best regards,

(Your name)