

Letters of Recommendation: Who to Ask, How to Ask & When to Ask

Letters of recommendation are required to apply for many scholarships, colleges/universities, internships and jobs. An outstanding letter of recommendation can boost the competitiveness of an application by giving insight into the applicant's character as well as complementing and confirming the information provided in the rest of the application.

*According to the College Board's College Admission and Enrollment Statistics, most schools ranked recommendations the most important factor after grade point average and test scores in determining which students they choose for admission.

1. Who to ask?

READ THE COLLEGE'S APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS. If you send out more than you need they may not get read.

Show that you read the directions by only submitting the materials that have been asked for. Plan ahead as much as possible! Ideally, you should give your recommenders 4-6 weeks to write and submit your letters. Anyone is fair game to be a recommender as long as they are not related to you. You should not be asking your mom! Think teachers, counselors, coaches, church leaders, and/or mentors.

Keep in mind that many teachers and recommenders have dozens of letters to write within a short amount of time. You want to prioritize asking them early on, so your letter of recommendation is done sooner rather than later. Recommenders can say no if they feel they do not have enough time to write you a thoughtful letter.

Only ask people who know you well AND like you: This may sound like common sense, but really smart students make this mistake all the time. Your application should be a glowing reflection of you and your potential for success - not a mixed bag of reserved praise and mild skepticism.

Do not ask people to recommend you who cannot give SPECIFIC DETAILS about you and your experiences.

Sure, it is great to have the mayor of your city write on your behalf, but not if the only thing the mayor can say about you is your name and that you interned with him/her. Admissions committees will know the difference between a genuine endorsement and some letter typed up by the mayor's secretary.

Do not push someone to recommend you either. If they are hesitant, then take that as your answer. You would not try to persuade someone to perform surgery on you. The best recommender is someone who truly believes in you and is enthusiastic about your prospects as you are.

2. How to ask?

If possible, arrange a meeting to ask for a letter of recommendation. If you need to email request, that is okay, but follow-up with an in-person meeting. Help your recommenders help you!

During your meeting, tell the potential letter writer about the opportunity you are applying for and why you are so interested in the opportunity. (Details on the college, scholarship, internship, etc.)

Then, explain why you think they would be a good person to highlight your accomplishments (give examples if you can) and ask if they would be able to write you a strong letter of recommendation.

If the potential recommender says yes, give them your folder with all of the necessary information. Whether they say yes or no, thank them for meeting with you.

If you know you have a certain weakness that is clear in your application, ask your recommenders to address the issue in their letters (for instance, if you scored low on the SAT but have a high GPA or vice-versa). Remember this is about marketing yourself. Help recommenders help you market yourself effectively to the admissions committee.

****When seeking letters of recommendation from a RAW Staff member, you should send an email and then follow-up with a face-to-face to confirm they received your email/request.***

Once they accept your request make sure you provide all of the necessary information (i.e. resume, deadline, recommendation form, method of submission, etc.) this will convey to your recommender just how important this letter is to you and demonstrates maturity and respect.

Bring a folder to the meeting with the following items:

- 1.) Your "Project Launch Recommendation" Request folder
- 2.) Your Brag Sheet
- 3.) Your resume
- 4.) Any required forms or info (for individual school or scholarships)
- 5.) Stamped, addressed envelopes if needed and/or instructions for submitting the letters online or elsewhere.

BEFORE you ask, make sure you have all of the materials they will need to complete a well thought out recommendation. Many teachers, supervisors and/or mentors deal with dozens of recommendation requests every year. Even if you are an excellent student, employee or participant they might not remember that smashingly astute comment you made last year.

Email Examples:

These are examples. Do not copy them verbatim! Put this into your own words, in your own voice. A personalized recommendation request can go a long way.

Dear Jason,

I have been attending RAW for 3 years and have been a part of DIG, Men 2 Be, and RAW Chiefs and I feel that I've learned a lot from you. You have been a great mentor to me and have helped me grow as a leader. I would like to ask whether you would be willing to write a strong letter of recommendation for me as I apply to college this year.

Of all my group leaders at RAW, I think you know me best, and I would be so grateful if you would write my recommendation. Please let me know if you can so that I can make sure I can provide you the information you would need to complete it by December 1st, 2019.

*Thank you,
Your name*

Dear Bruce,

I have been at RAW for one year and have enjoyed my time in AMP. I've been able to successfully complete portfolio pieces that I plan on submitting to college because of your help. You have been a great group leader and I have learned a lot from your art intensive sessions and I would like to ask whether you would be willing to write a letter of recommendation for me this year. I am applying to college and want to make sure I have a letter from someone who knows me and my artwork well. I would need the recommendation by November 15th, 2019. I will provide my brag sheet, resume, and formal recommendation folder if you accept.

*Thank you,
Your name*

3. When to ask?

ASAP! The people you asking are human, with busy schedules, lives and families and you want to be as sensitive to this as possible. Request letters by email at least 4 weeks in advance of when they are due.

4. How to send the request via Naviance?

Using www.Naviance.com, sign in to the top right of the screen; choose the Students & Families Login option. Enter your school's postal code. (If you don't know what it is use Google!) When the list appears, you will need to select your school.

When you first receive your Naviance access account your username and password will be LPS followed by your student ID number. If you ever forget your password, your guidance counselor can easily reset it for you at any time.

Click on the first tab to the left labeled "Colleges" then click on "Colleges I'm Applying To." Under the Teacher Recommendations section you have an option to add/cancel a request. All of your teachers should be listed in the drop box.

Select your teacher and write them a note similar to the email you will send to program staff requesting a recommendation.
ASK YOUR TEACHERS IN PERSON BEFORE DOING TAKING THIS STEP.

5. LOOK OUT FOR BAD REC LETTERS!

A lesser-known aspect is deciding which letters to send to schools. Some letters can actually do more harm than good. Here are the three biggest signs that a recommender is not up to par (and they are much more common in applications submitted by otherwise outstanding candidates than one would think):

- 1) There are no details
- 2) The writer clearly doesn't know the student personally
- 3) The letter only discusses material that's evident in the transcript/resume

6. Always send a thank you card!

Always send your writer a thank you note after you know the letter has been sent out, whether or not you have heard from the school. Don't wait too long to do this: a week or two is a good timeline. Letters of recommendation are important parts of the admissions process, and should be treated as such. For some students, these letters will be a crucial element in acceptance, and for other students they can be perfect supplements for an admissions interview.

Show your appreciation to staff, teachers, counselors or anyone else who has taken the time to work on your recommendation! If you are not feeling too creative, we have nice cards available for you to work on. Email works, but cards have a nice touch.