



# Empowerly's Guide to



## LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

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# Table of Contents



## Introduction

## Who to Ask

- The Teacher Recommendation
- The Counselor Recommendation
- 4-Step Plan to Finding Your Recommenders

## What to Prepare

- Steps to Forming a Meaningful Relationship
- Shaping Recommendations
- Brag Sheet Tips

## When to Take Action

- Stage 1: Proposing a Letter
- Stage 2: Providing Materials and a Deadline
- Stage 3: Writing a Thank You Note
- Early Application Deadlines

## How to Thank Your Recommenders

## Why It Matters





# Introduction

Most college applications require students to submit **letters of recommendation** from teachers and mentors. The purpose of these one-to-one letters is to demonstrate a student's potential outside of reported grades. Within the recommendation, the teacher has the opportunity to write a letter for the student, and often submit a few boxes measuring the student's relative aptitude as well.

Colleges appreciate insight gained from these letters, as they demonstrate parts of you that your application cannot. Letters show what a third-party figure thinks about you. It is compelling evidence because the person who writes your letter will attest to your character and work ethic via their observations over time.

When it comes time to ask, take plenty of time to decide who to approach for letters of recommendation. Testing, transcripts, and even your essays can tell colleges a good deal about how you perform in academic settings – and how you define yourself. They lack, however, the ability to combine objectivity and personality testimony. This is where letters of recommendation come in. Considering how much depends on the quality of your recommendations, do consider your timing and selection carefully.



# Who to Ask

The most common question Empowerly receives about letters of recommendation is, “who should you ask?” In response, our first tip is simple. Read each application carefully! Often, the application specifies who the letters must come from, and how many letters are required. Some may request teacher or counselor recommendations, while others are open to sports coaches, employers, or more. We’ll tackle the two most common reference letter types below.

## The Teacher Recommendation

The teacher letter is probably the most common type of recommendation. It is central to the admissions process and especially critical for Ivy League college admissions, who care greatly about academic dedication. The best outcome of a strong teacher recommendation gives the app reader a sense of the personality of the student.

Often at Empowerly, we help students find these teachers and request their letters - this is the basis of our college admissions counseling and college application help, much of which happens before the admissions season begins in senior year.



# The Counselor Recommendation

The college counselor recommendation letters, next to teacher recommendations, are one of the most important and overlooked elements of an application. Keep in mind, the Common Application has added two options for school counselors to **decline** to send an evaluation for students:

- **“I do not have sufficient personal knowledge of this student.”**
- **“The demands of my counseling load do not afford me sufficient time.”**

With these opt-out possibilities, you must give school counselors a reason to write genuine evaluations. This occurs because students typically interact less with counselors daily. If this is the case, you may be wondering, why is the counselor recommendation so important. Take time to develop a personal connection and show sincere effort in your academics and extracurricular activities. For more advice on how to connect with a guidance counselor for a letter of recommendation, [check out this article](#) for hands-on tips!

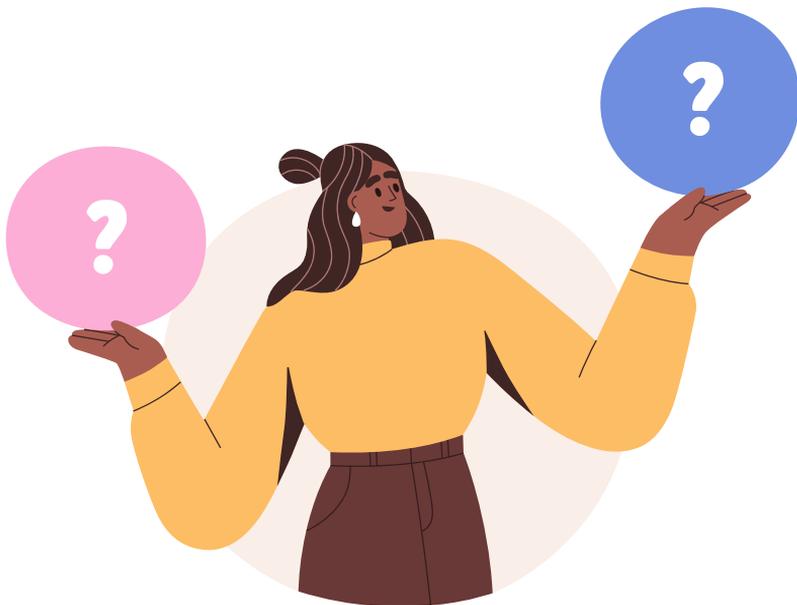
**In general**, colleges want to know the current version of you. Teachers from your junior year or above, who have known you for a while, make good references. If allowed, you may also consider teachers who know you from outside the classroom, like a club moderator, or a teacher who helped direct the play you performed. Consider adults who know your strengths, and have a good understanding of you as a person. Think of someone who is enthusiastic and who would love to write about you. If you are unsure if they would be willing to write on your behalf, the best move is to politely ask if they will be willing to write a letter of recommendation for you.



*Do you have any rules of thumb for students deciding who and how to ask?*

"In terms of who to ask, students who are applying to be STEM majors should at least have a science/math teacher. Another point to consider is that if you received a low grade in a class (C or B), and the teacher knows how hard you've worked despite the grade, it may be a strategic move to request a letter of recommendation from them. "

**- Empowerly Counselor Judy Wang**



# 4-Step Plan to Finding Your Recommenders

## ***Step 1: Read the requirements***

Finding out if your application lists any requirements for letters of recommendation is an easy yet important step. Pull out a piece of paper and write down all of the requirements for your letters of recommendation. Keep this paper out, because you'll use it for the following steps, too.

## ***Step 2: Make a list of people who know you well***

Now you'll create a master list of potential recommenders. Make a list of everyone who knows you well. Don't be afraid to think beyond teachers, although you should list as many teachers as possible, too. If it seems like you have too many options, that's a good problem to have! The rest of these steps will help you narrow down this list to find the best people to ask.

## ***Step 3: Crossing off some names***

This will ensure you don't spend time considering anyone that can't help you. First, cross off the names of any family members or personal friends on your list - they are considered biased recommenders and cannot be used for your applications. Then, cross off the names of anyone else you can't use based on the requirements you wrote down earlier. For example, some schools may not want supplemental recommendations, which are people you know from outside of school, although many will.



## Step 4: Tallying the score

Add a tally or a checkmark next to each name that agrees with the following statements:

- I have known this person for more than a year.
- I have taken a class or worked with this person within the past year.
- This person is a teacher or advisor for a subject in which I excel.
- This person is a teacher or advisor for a subject I want to study in college.
- I feel comfortable asking this person for help.
- I feel comfortable taking time out of my day to talk to this person about my college application.
- My family and friends think this person would write a good recommendation for me.
- I feel comfortable allowing this person to write a letter of recommendation without reading it personally.

Once you've tallied up the names, you'll want to ask the people who received the most tallies or checkmarks. Count up how many recommendations you'll need and are allowed to submit for your applications. Then, if you have more or less than you need, adjust accordingly.

Even if the person knows you really well, you still want to be able to converse with them. If you are asking a counselor to write a letter, make sure you make an appointment. You want to make it easy for them to write a positive and detailed letter for you. Remind them of your accomplishments and the challenges you have overcome. Finally, it's always useful to talk about your plans for college and what kind of hobbies you are excited about, to show your intellectual vitality and enthusiasm.





2. What do I talk about? During your first conversations, the most important aspect is that your mentor starts to recognize you and your personality. After that, start to tell them about your interests, your extracurricular activities, and even your worries. With a counselor or teacher, you can even brainstorm your preliminary college list. Don't waste their time by scheduling unnecessary meetings, but also don't put off regular contact. I know this is a hard balance, but one that you have to judge on a case-by-case basis. Realize that teachers and counselors become very busy during college application season (August through December) so try to develop a relationship earlier if possible. The longer the relationship, the better.

3. Finally, keep engaging over time. As we mentioned above, you don't need to put on a show for your mentor. Be honest and genuine; that's how a personal connection starts to develop. If you start this conversation early, your mentor can see your evolution over time and witness emotional, personal, and academic maturation. Then your mentor is able to bring these aspects together in an evaluation that makes you become an unfolding, complex, and interesting story instead of some impersonal words on a page.

Put effort into making these meetings meaningful and prepare ahead of time—for the most part, adults and mentors are always busy and will appreciate your effort. If you are able to put in the visible effort, they will more likely be willing to put effort into your letter.



# Shaping Recommendation Letters

It's actually not uncommon for students to have influence over the contents of the letters themselves. Many teachers will ask for information about you before writing your letter, regardless of how well you know them.

Help your recommender remember exactly why you stand out among your peers. You can do this somewhat subtly, by starting off with something like: "Hi, Mr. Smith! I was in your American History class last semester, and I really appreciated the chance to research and write about America's contribution to civil rights movements worldwide." This also spares Mr. Smith the hassle of digging his records to remember just what your project was or which semester you took which class.

You also don't want to make your potential recommender spend time researching how or when to submit your letter of recommendation. Print out a sheet saying how to submit it (By mail? To what address? Online? Where and how?) and the due date, with specifics (is the due date for when it's mailed, when it's received by mail, or when it's submitted online?). If it needs to be submitted by mail, include an envelope you've already stamped and addressed. All of this will demonstrate your responsibility, maturity, and thoughtfulness.

Unless your recommender knows you exceptionally well, he or she will probably want to hear more than this. Be prepared to discuss your course history, your interests, your reasons for choosing particular colleges, and more. Having these answers prepared will help you come across positively. Better yet, prepare a high school resume so your recommender has something to refer to while writing the letter.

Additionally, it's helpful to draft up some form of a "brag sheet."



# Brag Sheet Tips

A “brag sheet” is a helpful tool that digs a bit more into your motivations, goals, and personality. It provides a cheat sheet of sorts that the teacher can work off of if they want to. Brag sheet questions may fall along lines like

- What are some of your passions?
- What major(s) are you interested in and why?
- What do you consider to be your proudest academic accomplishment?
- How would you describe yourself? What are your best qualities?
- What historical events, people, literature, or classes have had an impact on you, and how?
- What is your philosophy of life?



Answer every question to the best of your ability. Even if you don't think your teacher will use it or needs to use it, you can fill it out anyway. Just the process of answering some of the questions helps you to explore the type of person you are and the type of person you want to become. Outside of applying to colleges, it allows for important self-reflection that we don't often get the chance to immerse ourselves in.

Are you lost for what kind of qualities to write about? Many high school students struggle to talk about themselves. We have a few ideas to jump-start your brainstorming process. While you can look up what characteristics specific colleges look for, such as Ivy League colleges, there are some traits we found on college websites again and again:

- Leadership
- Commitment
- Work ethic
- Public service
- Openness
- Ambition
- Curiosity





While you may feel you possess any or all of these qualities, you must be able to demonstrate them through your work. There are a number of convincing ways to do this that go beyond simply stating, “I am a committed leader,” or something equally unsubstantial. Consider citing examples of your projects, obstacles you have overcome, and activities or causes you spend your free time on.

Characteristics colleges look for in students carry a lot more weight when someone else attributes them to you. If your recommendation letters consistently share your positive characteristics, colleges will take notice.

## When to Take Action

When to begin? Truthfully, think about starting this process the summer before 9th grade and constantly add to it. Google Docs and other cloud-based programs allow you to archive and easily update and locate a resume. Each summer reflects on the activities from the prior school year and updates it. In all grades, students will find worth in connecting to mentors and teachers in a meaningful way, so building these relationships early on will never be a waste of time.

When you come to the time of asking for a letter of recommendation, you want to be sure to allow enough time for your reference to complete it. Your reference is writing on your behalf out of generosity, they will have other responsibilities to complete. [Plus, your reference will do a better job when they're not rushed!] Usually, a month in advance is acceptable, but the earlier the better. Remember that your teachers and counselors have their own work plus other recommendations as well.

These are the basic steps you must complete in a timely manner:

- Proposing a letter
- Providing materials and a deadline
- Writing a thank you note

## Stage 1: Proposing a Letter

Of course, when you ask for a letter of recommendation, you'll want to use your manners and remember to say "please" and "thank you." You're asking these people to do you favors, so don't go into the situation with an attitude of expectation or entitlement.

With that in mind, ask early! Make your initial request at least a month before the letter is due. This is a way of respecting your recommender's time and life outside of work. If you ask for a letter the day before it's due, you're basically asking, "Will you please cancel whatever evening plans you had to write a letter talking about how great I am?" Not a great start. If you ask well in advance, you're saying, "I'm respectful enough of your time and busy life that I want to give you as much flexibility as possible, since — after all — I'm asking you to do a favor for me."

Whoever you ask probably won't make a specific mention of it if you don't do a great job of these things. But you want a glowing letter of recommendation from someone who has just been reminded all over again of why he or she is so impressed with you, right?



## Stage 2: Providing Materials and a Deadline

If they accept, give them a stamped and addressed envelope for each letter they'll be writing to facilitate the process as much as possible for them. Give them a list of due dates as well, and check in with them a week before the due date. If anyone should decline to write you a letter, don't fret too much about it; they may feel unequipped to write you the best letter possible, and ultimately are doing you a service by declining. You can simply move on to someone else on your list.

## Stage 3: Writing a Thank-You Note

After your recommendation letters are sent in, be sure to write thank-you notes to your recommenders for the service they have done for you. Ideally, you should send this letter within a day or two of confirming submission with this person. However, better late than never; don't skip sending it entirely just because it's been a week or two.

## Early Application Deadlines

What about early action/decision? If the student is applying for early action or early decision to any university, the deadline will most likely be early November. This may influence who the recommender is because he/she will only be approximately two months into the school year which is not enough time to really get to know the teacher in most cases. Think back to a junior year for a recommender and, possibly a 10th-grade teacher if the coursework was rigorous.



**General Tip:** keep in mind, at some final stage in the process, you may be asked whether you want to read the letter your reference writes. You want to waive your right to see the letters. Admissions will trust your references more if they know that you have not seen them!

Make sure your references know the application deadline and do not be afraid to follow up with them periodically to make sure they sent it. Once you have all your deadlines met, send thank you notes to your references. Without their opinions, you would not be able to meet the application requirements.

## How to Thank Your Recommenders

So next, let's talk about what that thank you note should look like. There are some general tips that apply to all of your thank you letters, whether to people on your end or the college's end. Keep it short. Think of this as more of a thank-you note than a full letter.

1. Personalize what you write. Don't copy and paste a form letter and change nothing but the names.
2. Email is fine! Don't worry about sending a hard copy of the letter, unless that's how you've done the rest of your communication with this particular person.
3. If you aren't sure how formal or casual to be, err on the side of formality.

When you write to your references specifically, start off by expressing your (specific) thanks: "Thank you for taking the time to write a letter of recommendation for my college application," for example.



Next, go on to be specific about how this person has shaped your journey if this is applicable. For example, if you had a history teacher write a letter of recommendation, you could say something like, "As you know, it was your history class last year that made me consider history as a major, and I look forward to exploring that further in college." If you have specific positive memories that really stand out, you can mention those too.

Finish off with another expression of gratitude, and offer to keep this person updated on your college admissions journey. If you're writing to someone who composed a letter of recommendation for you, you could say something like, "I can't wait to let you know which schools accepted me, and which one I finally attend!"

Then, of course, follow through on the promise to keep this person updated.

## Why it Matters

The recommendation from your teacher is important because it gives legitimacy to your academic ability outside of grades and to your personality outside of your own essays. Developing key relationships with teachers across grades, and especially in 11th and 12th grade, is the best way to both score well in classes and have quality recommendations.

The importance of letters of recommendation varies for [each college](#) and also depends on your high school experience. If you attend a high school with a large student population where an individual relationship with your counselor is not as likely, then colleges understand that your counselor's letter of recommendation may be less personal and instead turn to your teacher's recommendations for a better glimpse into who you are. If your grades dipped in a certain class or semester, the teacher writing your letter of recommendation could help explain the reason (perhaps you were sick or had a disruptive life event occur).



Another way to think about your recommendations is as a portfolio. How do they tie together and work with your essays? How do they work with your extracurricular activities? The final step is to think about how to tailor each letter in a way that demonstrates different personality facets.

Remember that your recommendations are only one piece of the jigsaw puzzle that forms your application. Even with amazing recommendations, it's still crucial to keep in mind other factors like your grades, standardized test scores, essays, extracurricular activities, admissions interviews, etc. On the other hand, it's also important to keep in mind that a mediocre recommendation probably will not single-handedly make or break you.

In the end, the most important takeaway is to consciously develop relationships with teachers early! Trust me. Your future self will thank us.

*What role do you view letters of recommendation in a student's journey?*

"Letters of recommendation are the bows that tie your applications together - the letters of rec can present your story beautifully (if teachers vouch for your talents/drive/worth ethic), or they can make your application look average at best."

**- Empowerly Counselor Judy Wang**



## Biography of Empowerly Counselor: Judy Wang

Judy is an educator with a Masters of Science in Educational Technology from Johns Hopkins University. She graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in Psychology and pursued her passion for teaching by joining Teach For America. She has specialized in STEM education at the K-12 level. Judy has a strong understanding of both the humanities and STEM fields, and offers a unique perspective as she has previously worked with school administrations. Judy is currently being trained by a former Stanford admissions committee officer on best practices regarding college applications.



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