

College Letters of Recommendation

Begging for Them with Dignity

Last year it was only 52. The year before that 68. Three years ago, it was a banner year—87 letters of recommendation hammered out on my keyboard. I was in a dead heat with a colleague of mine from San Jose, until she lapped me with a surge of requests from her juniors applying to prestigious summer camps. Her total for the year? 99.

Letters of recommendation are required by nearly all private colleges and universities and by most scholarship selection committees. While it sometimes feels like I have to write them for the entire graduating class, the truth is that any high school instructor who teaches juniors and seniors is probably spending 5-10 extra hours per week composing letters of recommendation. Some colleges require the junior English teacher to write a letter; others insist on a math or science instructor, and most require two teacher recs and one counselor rec.

Timing and protocol can be crucial factors in securing a good letter of recommendation. Every year I tell my students the story of the counselor I saw slogging to her car on the rainy afternoon before our winter break. She was hefting a swollen book bag of recommendation requests. When I wished her a happy holiday, she grumbled that she ‘d been planning on it until a high-performing senior had dumped this pile of requests on her desk—all due January 1st. I tell my students, I don’t care how high your GPA is, if you don’t have the common sense to respect the time and effort of your counselors and teachers, you won’t garner the best recommendations. With this in mind, I have composed the following tips for students asking for letters of recommendation. I title it “Begging With Dignity.”

1. **When asking for a letter, include a brief resume.** Don’t assume because a teacher had you in 4th period English, that she will know everything about you. She may not know that you were dribbling a basketball and blending smoothies while you were reading *Beowulf*.
2. **Always fill out your portion of the recommendation form.** Your teachers do not know your social security number and address—nor should they! Every year I find at least one blank letter of rec form crumbled in the corner of my book bag.
3. **Approach your teachers early.** Give your teachers and counselors at least 2-3 weeks lead-time. Also give us the deadline for your letters—a list is helpful if you have several that need mailing.
4. **Ask for letters of rec from teachers whom you like and respect, not necessarily those who’ve given you A’s.** I remember a student’s work ethic, his insightful participation, and sometimes his wit, but I never remember someone’s grade. Colleges already know your grades; they’re looking for what type of student you are. In fact, many teacher recommendation forms now ask HOW the student earned his grade: Diligence? Grade consciousness? Natural ability? Or any combination of the

three. The last thing you want a teacher to acknowledge is that you squeaked out an A- because you were constantly point-mongering for extra credit.

5. **If a teacher hesitates, move on.** When a teacher appears reluctant to commit to writing a letter of rec for you, don't take it personally. The teacher may have already written too many letters to that particular school for the year, or they may just not have the time. It's in your best interest to find a teacher who will respond with an enthusiastic "yes!" when you ask. You want a hot endorsement—not a lukewarm form letter.
6. **Always provide stamped and addressed envelopes.** If necessary, indicate with post-it notes when to mail each letter—deadlines vary for early admits.
7. **Waive your right to access.** Checking this box on your letter of rec form shows confidence in the recommendation and adds credibility to the letter. Most teachers will give you a copy of the letter to add to your portfolio
8. **Say thank you!** Write a note; bake brownies (personally I prefer flowers or a potted plant, so I can think of you when they bloom or wither ☺) You may need several more letters from the same teacher for springtime scholarships. A thank-you sent a few days before a deadline is also an excellent way to gently remind the teacher to finish your letter.