Writing effective letters of recommendation

From counselors to coaches, professors to peers, colleges invite recommendation letters from individuals who see students from different vantage points. Their insights help application readers get to know a student better by identifying accomplishments, persistence, character, personality, and potential fit. Here are some suggestions for how to be the best advocate for your students.

Your student has a reason for asking you. Find out what it is.

By understanding your student's motivations — what they learned, how you challenged them, what they enjoyed, how they grew — you can turn an effective letter into a truly compelling one.

Tell a story that only you can tell.

Colleges don't need a recap of things they will read in the application. They need your unique insights on what makes that student a scholar, friend, competitor, leader, citizen, humanitarian, classmate — whatever role you see them in on a regular basis.

Anecdotes outshine adjectives. Always.

Storytelling is a powerful device. Two sentences recounting how a student organized a community fundraiser are infinitely more effective than a few generic leadership descriptors.

Colleges value candor, not perfection.

Students — and teenagers in particular — are works in progress. By offering an honest assessment of your students' strengths as well as the areas where they are working to improve, you enhance your own credibility as a recommender.

> *Letters of recommendation provide an outside perspective and add important commentary to complement the grades, standardized test scores, and additional information found in a student's application. They help us look past the numbers and learn more about who the student is, what they will add to our campus, and whether they may be the best fit for our school.*
>
> **— Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art (New York, NY)**

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Make your letter about your student, not yourself.

Context is helpful. If this is one of the best students you've taught, supervised, or coached in a 25-year career, say so. But every word you use to describe your syllabus or credentials takes away from your description of your student.

Form letters are convenient but counterproductive.

Relying on pre-written letters or paragraphs may save time, but personalizing your letter will help you be the advocate your student needs.

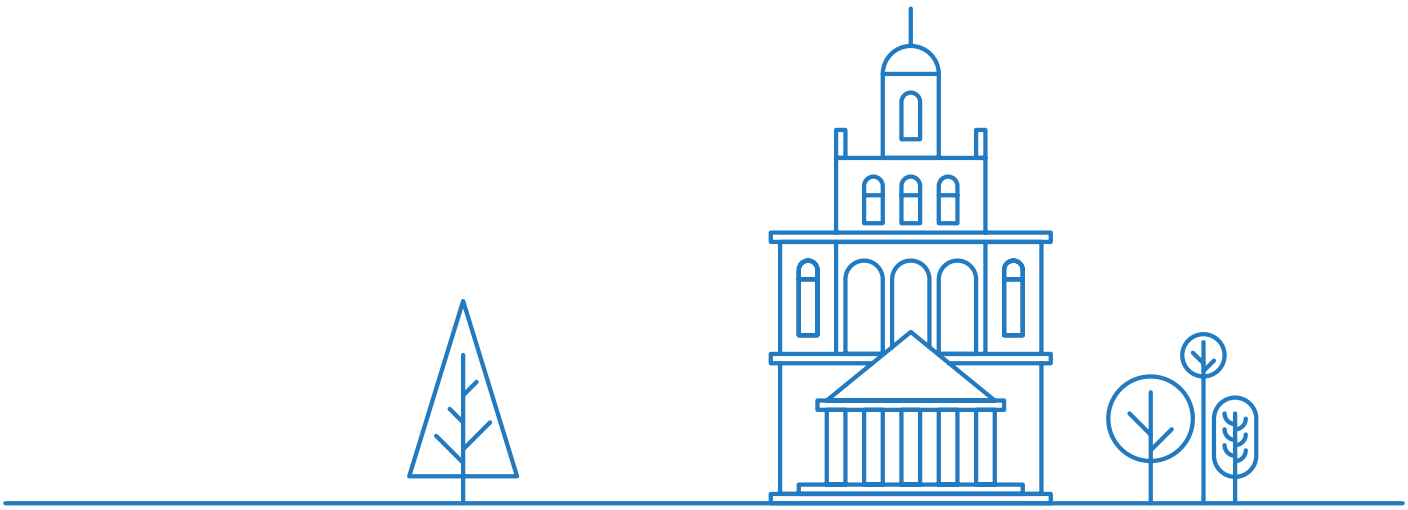
Consider sharing your letter with a colleague before sending.

Aside from the extra proofreading safeguard, a peer review from someone else who knows your student can help ensure that what you intended to write and what you have actually written are the same thing.

It's okay to say no.

If you're not in a position to write a supportive letter on behalf of a student, you should say so. If you can help that student identify a recommender who might be a better fit, all the better.

Check out additional resources at **commonapp.org/ready** or visit our Solutions Center at **recsupport.commonapp.org**



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