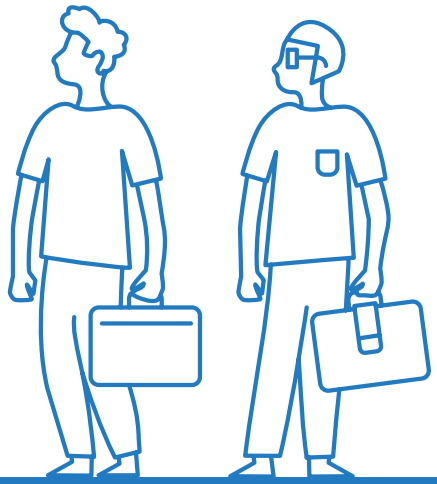
Writing guide for counselors and teachers

Colleges that invite letters of recommendation are looking for stories that will help them better evaluate a student for academic potential and fit within their community. Counselors and teachers are powerful advocates in this effort, each poised to share unique and valuable insights. The context they offer helps clarify, support, and build upon information provided by the student.



How counselor letters add value

Counselors provide a view of an applicant within the context of an entire graduating class and school community, addressing a student's academic achievements, extracurricular accomplishments, and personal interests and goals, without repeating what is in the application.

How teacher letters add value

Teachers write from the vantage point of the classroom, using their firsthand knowledge of a student's intellectual curiosity, creative thought, quality of writing, class behavior, and work habits to depict the student as a scholar.

While both counselor and teacher recommendations capture a student's personality and strengths, there are distinct differences between the two perspectives. Below are examples of some key student characteristics admissions committees are trying to assess and how each writer might address them.

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	Counselors	Teachers
Leadership	Anecdotes describing leadership in clubs, sports, and other pursuits in the school and community	Examples from the classroom, such as leadership during class discussions and with group projects and assignments Ability and willingness to enhance the learning of their peers
Academic achievement	An explanation of the student's transcript and test scores within the context of the school and graduating class, including unusual circumstances with course selections or performance Context for and rationale behind specific awards and honors	Insights about classroom performance and approaches to specific projects and assignments Topics where the student excelled or exhibited particular interest Willingness to seek help when needed
Growth	Growth measured over the course of the high school career, including academic progress and social-emotional development and maturation	Growth over the course of the class, or since the last time the teacher taught the student, including the willingness to be challenged and learning from the experience
Engagement	Level of involvement in school, family, and community Particular experiences that have shaped the student	Class participation, contributions to discussions, desire to engage with the learning process beyond what's expected of the class
Resilience	Response to challenges impacting overall academic performance Hardships and obstacles faced or overcome, such as school transfers, family situations, illness, or personal struggles	Reaction to academic setbacks such as failing a test or not understanding a concept Response to personal challenges that may have affected attendance in class or the ability to be present and learn
Character	Personal interactions with the student and observations of how the student interacts with other students and faculty Anecdotes that highlight empathy or concern for others	Personal interactions with the student and observations of how the student engages with peers in class discussions and group projects Willingness to assist other students

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