

Secure Recommendation Letters

Goal: Find adults that are not friends or family members who are going write great things about you.

Who should your recommenders be?

Just like with everything else, the answer to this question is going to change depending on each college's requirements. Almost every school will ask for at least one teacher recommendation and some form of recommendation from your counselor. Many schools ask for more than one teacher rec and may allow you to get additional letters from a coach, boss, mentor, activity leader, etc.

When thinking about who your recommenders will be, follow these rules:

- DO NOT ask friends or family members
- Stick with teachers who taught you in 11th or 12th grade.
- At least one of your teacher recs should be from a core subject teacher: math, English, social studies, science, or foreign language. If you have the option to secure additional letters, you can ask an elective teacher or non-academic adult (coach, boss, mentor, activity leaders, etc.).
- Choose a teacher whose class you did / have done well. Even better, choose a teacher whose class you show / have shown improvement. Recommendation letters can be really powerful when a teacher talks about the time and effort you've invested to improve.
- **Nice to have:** Choose a teacher who has been teaching a long time. This is not a must. If the teacher who can write you the best recommendation has been teaching for two years, go with him/her. But it doesn't hurt when a teacher who has been teaching for decades says you were one of his/her best students ever.
- **Most important:** Choose a teacher who knows you well and with whom you have a good relationship with. You want a teacher who knows you not only as a student but as a person. You want a teacher who can discuss your character by giving examples of your behavior both inside and outside of class. You want a teacher who will write a letter that could only be about you, not a generic description that he/she could insert any student's name into.

An Important Note About Non-Teacher Recommendation Letters That Can Change Your Game

When I say non-teachers, I mean coaches, bosses, mentors, leaders of extracurricular activities you participate in, etc. Of course, I **do not** mean family or friends.

If you're applying to a school that gives you the option to get a non-teacher rec letter, and you have someone in your life that knows you well in a different setting in which you have accomplished great things, take advantage of this opportunity. Whether or not you have great relationships with your teachers, letters from non-teachers can be powerful. They can show colleges another side of you that your teachers don't know and could not capture in their letters.

What if a school doesn't allow you to submit non-teacher rec letters but a non-teacher rec letter can really help you? In that case, you can still get non-teachers to write you a letter. It will be called a "letter of support" rather than a recommendation letter. If the non-teacher sends it in, it will still be considered along with your other application materials. I encourage students to get letters of support from non-teachers who can speak highly of their actions in a non-school setting.

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Each college will have its own requirements for letters of recommendation that you need to follow closely. Let's look at examples of a couple real colleges' recommendation requirements.

The images below show what the recommender's pages look like when you apply to Emory University and Beloit College through The Common Application. All Common App schools use the same online system, so each Common App school's recommender's page will look the same. The difference will be in the requirements, as you can see below.

Emory University Requires: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Secondary School Report from your counselor• At least 2 teacher recs; at most 4 (second 2 are optional)• No "other"/non-teacher recs; you are allowed up to 4	Beloit College Requires: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Secondary School Report from your counselor• At least 1 teacher rec; at most 3 (second 2 are optional)• No "other"/non-teacher recs; you are allowed up to 2
<p>● Counselor You must invite a school Counselor who will complete the School Report and other forms for you.</p> <p>Invite Counselor</p> <p>● Teacher Please select and assign the Teacher(s) below whose recommendation will be submitted to this college on your behalf. You must first invite a Teacher using the 'Invite Teacher' link before you can assign them for this college.</p> <p>Required: 2 Allowed: 4</p> <p>Invite Teacher</p> <p>✓ Other Recommender Please select and assign the Other Recommender(s) below whose recommendation(s) will be submitted to this college on your behalf. You must invite an Other Recommender using the 'Invite Other Recommender' link before you can assign them for this college.</p> <p>Recommender types accepted: Arts Teacher, Clergy, Coach, College Access Counselor, Employer, Family Member, Peer, Other</p> <p>Required: 0 Allowed: 4</p> <p>Add Another</p>	<p>● Counselor You must invite a school Counselor who will complete the School Report and other forms for you.</p> <p>Invite Counselor</p> <p>● Teacher Please select and assign the Teacher(s) below whose recommendation will be submitted to this college on your behalf. You must first invite a Teacher using the 'Invite Teacher' link before you can assign them for this college.</p> <p>Required: 1 Allowed: 3</p> <p>Invite Teacher</p> <p>✓ Other Recommender Please select and assign the Other Recommender(s) below whose recommendation(s) will be submitted to this college on your behalf. You must invite an Other Recommender using the 'Invite Other Recommender' link before you can assign them for this college.</p> <p>Recommender types accepted: Arts Teacher, Clergy, Coach, College Access Counselor, Employer, Family Member, Peer, Other</p> <p>Required: 0 Allowed: 2</p> <p>Add Another</p>

How to Secure Recommendation Letters

You've probably heard something like, "In order to catch a crook you have to think like a crook." Well, I'm going to say that in order to get a great recommendation letter, you have to think like a recommender.

Whether your recommender is a teacher, coach or some other adult, he/she probably has a full-time job. And whether or not writing recommendation letters is in their job description, you are adding work to their plates. You are asking for a favor, but it's not just any favor. How well this favor is done can have a big impact on your chances of getting into college. Your job is to make it as easy as possible for your recommenders to help you. Let's talk about how you do this.

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When to ask

Request your letter at least one month before the deadline. Remember, your recommenders have lives and responsibilities of their own – not to mention that they are probably writing rec letters for other students. Be considerate by giving them plenty of time to get the job done well.

How to ask

Step 1: Prepare – *before you ask...*

- Make sure you know what each school's deadline is for recommendation letters to be submitted.
- Update your resume / portfolio. No matter how well your recommender may know you, it helps to give them more information on what you've done academically and outside of the classroom.

Step 2: Choose Your Recommender(s)

This was covered at the beginning of the article

Step 3: Request a Recommendation Letter

Send a nice email to the person you want to write your recommendation letter. The sample below should give you a sense of what to do, but you should tweak the letter to fit your writing style, your relationship with the recommender, and the requirements of the colleges you're applying to.

Dear _____,

I hope this finds you well.

I am in the process of applying to (list your college(s)) and I am writing to ask you to be one of my recommenders. I believe that you will do the best job describing what I can bring to a college campus both as a student and a person.

The recommendation letter deadlines for each of my colleges are as follows:

- College #1 – Deadline
- College #2 – Deadline
- College #3 – Deadline

I know you are very busy which is why I want to make this process as easy for you as possible. I have attached my resume so you have a better sense of my extracurricular activities and accomplishments, as well as my performance in other classes. Please let me know if there is any other information I can provide that would help you do the best possible job and make this process as easy as possible for you.

Once I have your permission, I will sign you up to be my recommender and you should receive an email with instructions.

At your earliest convenience, please let me know if you will be my recommender. I really appreciate you considering helping me.

Sincerely,
(Your Name)

Step 4: Invite / Assign Your Recommenders

Whether you're using The Common Application or a different kind of online application, you will most likely have to invite or assign recommenders. This means putting their names and basic contact info into the online system and clicking "invite" or "assign." Once you do this, your recommender will receive an automatic email telling him/her what to do, how to do it and by when to do it.

Secure Recommendation Letters

Remember the recommender's page from Emory University? Here it is again. See where it says "invite counselor" and "invite teacher"? This page will look the same for all colleges that use the Common App. For those that don't, the webpage may look different but the process will probably be very similar.

- **Counselor**
You must invite a school Counselor who will complete the School Report and other forms for you.
[Invite Counselor](#)
- **Teacher**
Please select and assign the Teacher(s) below whose recommendation will be submitted to this college on your behalf. You must first invite a Teacher using the 'Invite Teacher' link before you can assign them for this college.
Required: 2 **Allowed: 4**
[Invite Teacher](#)

Step 5: Follow Up / Make Sure Letters Get Submitted

Since you will most likely be applying to college online, it should be easy for you to see whether your recommenders have completed their letters or not. If the deadline is approaching and you see that your recommender has not completed his/her letter, it is completely fine to check in with him/her about it. You can do this by sending an email or you can just do it by asking in person. In either case, be polite and understanding.

Step 6: Send a Thank You Note

We've discussed several times the importance of sending thank you notes. Get in the habit of doing this. Unlike eating your boogers or biting your toenails, it's a good habit. Once your applications are complete, you can write your teacher an email or a handwritten note to express your thanks. Handwritten notes are best, if possible. Finally, it is really nice to let your recommenders know when you are accepted to a school. They were a big part of the process and if you get in, it's a win for them too.

Sample Thank You Note to Recommender

Dear _____,

I really appreciate the time and energy you took to write a letter of recommendation for me. It meant so much that you were willing to advocate for me. As I receive decision letters from colleges, I will be sure to let you know. Thanks so much again!

Sincerely,
(Your Name)

For examples of strong and average recommendation letters, visit the Tools Section!