

Letters of Recommendation – can be the tipping factor

By Lee Shulman Bierer College Admissions Strategies May 6, 2021

College applications don't open until this summer or early fall, so why are we talking about Letters of Recommendation in May?

The reason is that now, yes in May, is the time to begin asking teachers if they'll be able to write your letter. I've heard too many stories of top-notch students who wait until the fall to ask their teachers for recommendations for their college applications, only to be surprised and embarrassed when they are told that their favorite teachers are already full since students asked them last spring.

Letters of recommendation carry varying weight, depending on the perspective of the college or university and who writes them. The more selective colleges may ask for two or three recommendation letters. Questions abound: Who should you ask? What are they used for? Where do they go? When should you ask them? Why are they important? And, how do you prepare them to write the best letter possible?

Who?

Letters of recommendation are the most powerful when they are written by teachers, coaches, club or internship advisors, youth group advisors or employers who know you well. The people you ask should be able to describe your skills and your accomplishments as well as your personality. Colleges prefer letters from junior year teachers since they are the most familiar with your most recent work. Read instructions carefully since some colleges may specifically request a science or math teacher, especially if you're applying to an engineering program.

What?

Since most letters of recommendation are glowing and full of praise for the applicant, colleges who take them seriously are trying to get beneath the surface of who you are. The letters that share personal anecdotes about you reveal the less tangible qualities that a college can't deduce from grades and test scores. A well-written letter of recommendation will showcase your abilities and make you a compelling candidate.

Where?

Colleges accept letters of recommendation electronically through the Common Application. Follow directions carefully and don't send more than a college requests. Colleges who participate in the Common Application detail how many letters of recommendation they require and how many they allow.

When?

It is best to ask teachers in the spring of junior year if they are willing and able to write a letter on your behalf. If they say "yes", then ask them about their preferred timelines. Some teachers prefer to take care of the letters over the summer and others want a true summer vacation. If you have colleges

with early deadlines (October 15 and November 1), make sure you provide your recommenders with at least a month's time to write the letters.

Why?

Letters of recommendation can often be the critical tipping factor when two candidates present similarly and colleges can pick just one.

How?

There's a good chance that the more information you provide your recommender, the better the letter will be. I suggest that all students prepare an Activity Resume or a Brag Sheet that details the following items: extracurricular activities; community service involvement; leadership positions; honors, scholarship and awards; employment; internships and job shadowing experiences and what you've done during your last three summers.

Must dos:

- Be certain to waive your right to view recommendation letters on your application forms. Admission officers will trust them more if you haven't seen them.
- Send a confirmation email to your recommenders thanking them and being specific about next steps.
- Send thank you notes once you know the colleges have received the letters of recommendation.