FUNDAMENTALS OF LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION FOR COLLEGE

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Going through the list of requirements for college, you might be stressed by the letter of recommendation component. Which teachers should you ask? What's the best way to ask them? What do strong letters even look like? Will the teachers you ask write great ones on your behalf? Since recommendation letters are the one component of your application you don't write, they show a different perspective and provide admissions officers a more objective viewpoint regarding what you're like to have in the classroom.

One of the most important components of the letter of recommendation process is finding the best people to ask who can elaborately speak about your achievements. To guide you through this application component, I've outlined exactly what letters of recommendation are, who to ask, how to go about asking them, and what you're looking for in an ideal recommendation letter.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION
THE BASICS

As the name suggests, a recommendation letter is a letter from someone who knows you well under an academic or professional setting, highlighting your best qualities and why they recommend you for a position or institution you're applying for. For most cases, colleges require letters of recommendation from two teachers, one from your guidance counselor, and provide the option of one additional recommendation that could come from a coach or club advisor. The requirements vary from school to school - some schools ask for no additional letters, while others, such as Dartmouth and Davidson, ask for a peer recommendation.

Sometimes a college might ask for an additional letter of recommendation in case of waitlists, deferrals, or for specific cases. For example, if you're an athlete, schools often like to see recommendations from your coaches as well as your teacher. Or, if you had a strong working relationship with your supervisor from an internship or volunteer experience, you might want to add their voice through an additional letter. If you're waitlisted at a school, a recommendation from another teacher (one who hasn't already written your initial letters) reaffirming that you're indeed an asset to the classroom and school community can help support your case.

Follow the instructions from each school to submit the required or recommended number of letters. Go with the guidelines and don't provide more letters than allowed – admissions officers already have plenty of reading to do! Note if the institution specifies particulars in the who should write the letter or what the letter should include. Admissions offices always appreciate applicants who know how to follow directions.

WHO TO ASK

Long story short, your letters of recommendation should be written by teachers who know you the best. Here are some suggestions on teachers you could ask:

Teachers who have known you the longest
By seeing you flourish as a student and person over a significant period of time, these teachers are valuable in emphasizing your growth since they first met you. They have more years to pull from when thinking about anecdotes that capture times that you impressed them or instances where you have shown desirable qualities that colleges seek.

Teachers you've had more recently
Your recommender should also be able to speak to your current performance at school. If you choose a teacher who only had you in the 9th grade but hasn't kept up with you since then, the information they provide is probably outdated. Choose at least one of your teachers from 11th grade to provide a recent account of your academic presence. The second choice can be a bit more flexible.

Teachers who you've worked the most closely with
Chances are, teachers who you have worked more closely with will have more examples to draw from and are more likely to make their letters personal. This could be a teacher you've conducted an independent study with, or gone to see after school to ask questions on the material. Or, this could be someone you've taken the initiative to get to know and can thus speak to your assertiveness and personality.

Teacher with whom you've worked with in an extracurricular setting
Choosing a teacher who has seen your work inside and outside the classroom can add a nuanced layer to your application. Admissions officers can learn not only about your academic skills, but more about how your teacher views your community involvement and extracurriculars. This could be your science teacher who is also the coach of the robotics team and has seen you thrive as a student and team player. This could be your art teacher whom you've worked with in building your portfolio and can speak to the hard work and commitment you put into each piece of art.

Teachers with connections to the college
If one of your high school teachers is an alum of one of your top choice schools, you can take advantage of their familiarity with both parties. Since they know the school, they can speak for how you would fit in with the community. However, if you've never taken a class with them, showing up at their office out of the blue may not be the wisest decision. Only ask if they've had experience teaching or supervising you.

Teachers who taught the subjects that align with your goals and interests
It is wise to ask teachers in similar fields for your recommendation letters. Who else to better support your college application for a prospective math major than your high school math teacher? This way, the teacher can convey your prowess in math and concretely discuss your passion towards continuing your study of mathematics.

Since the subject you're choosing for your major is possibly a class you enjoyed in high school, your math teacher can also speak for the enthusiasm you bring to each class and for learning new topics. But don't ask two teachers from the same discipline (for example, two English teachers). While at least one letter should come from a teacher in the same discipline as your intended major, for your second letter, ask an instructor from a different subject to show that you're skilled in more than just your field of interest.

Don't pick a teacher who is famous or well-connected if they don't know you as well as others who would do a better job of praising you in detail. The recognition 1) most likely won't benefit you at all and 2) isn't worth a subpar reference. Recommendation letters might just act as the affirmation a school needs to know you'd be a good fit.

HOW TO ASK

Asking for letters of recommendation can be intimidating, no matter how strong your relationship with the teacher is. After all, you're essentially asking them to endorse you and take time out of their busy lives for your applications.

When it comes to talking to your recommenders, it's extra crucial to ask them early. Teachers have schedules as hectic as students do and if you're not one of the firsts to take the plunge, they might have already committed to many recommendations already. Contact them at least three or four months in advance to discuss the letters. You should ask your letter writers ideally before the end of junior year so that they can write their letters over the summer when they have a lighter workload.

Don't just write them an email or mention that you'd like a letter from them when passing them in the hallway. Do write an email asking if you could meet with them to discuss your college admissions process and the possibility of a letter of recommendation. Tell them how your application process is going - let them know about the colleges that you've decided to apply to and what major you hope to pursue.

When the time comes to get to the reason for your meeting, don't just demand a letter from them - frame your request as a question. You can't just assume they'll say yes! If they agree, sincerely thank them for their time.

Write a cover letter once your teachers say yes, thanking them for their time and outlining what you hope they can highlight in their letters. Mention specific academic achievements, personality traits, and anecdotes that capture your work ethic or leadership skills. Don't worry - you aren't being too pushy by writing this letter. Teachers are almost always impressed by the initiative and find that it's a helpful guide in own letter writing process. Of course, let them when they should submit the letters by, and send them a gentle reminder as the deadline draws closer.

WHAT LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION SHOULD INCLUDE

Letters of recommendation should provide admissions officers with new information that complements the other components of your application profile. Any glowing letters of recommendation should include the following:

The context of your mentorship
Admissions officers won't be able to properly evaluate the recommendation letter if the writer just says they are a teacher at your school. Your recommender needs to provide context on how they know you, the subject, activity, or sport in which they supervised you, and how long you've worked or studied under them.

For example: *I first met Jack when he started high school three years ago. Since then, he's taken three years of English classes with me. I have also served as a mentor for the community service project that he led with students…*

Superlative and comparative praise
Colleges know that your teachers meet many students year after year. One of their goals in reading recommendations is to figure out how you fare compared to the rest of the pack. A good recommendation letter should definitely frame you as an individual who stands out among their peers. The best way to demonstrate this is through superlative language, such as "best" or "most," and comparative language such as "more than," "compared to other students," and "better than."

For example: *Jack is the most dedicated student I've ever had. His work has always stood out to me more than that of his peers...*

Concrete examples of your abilities and performance
Admissions officers won't take your teachers' praise at their word if they don't add specific anecdotes or examples to support their compliments. When meeting with your recommenders, remind them of a time they saw your leadership skills or a moment they appreciated your hard work.

For example: *I have seen a thorough demonstration of Jack's ability to work well with his peers. First when he led the the project on…*

A glowing recommendation is one which spares no details of your strengths and speaks to your abilities with confidence and high approval. So it's all the more important that you choose someone who doesn't have to exaggerate or make up stories (should never be done!) to boast about your best qualities. You should also feel comfortable talking to the person candidly about the impression you want their letter to leave on college admissions officers.

As you can see, who you choose to write your letters of recommendation for college is closely connected with their ability to write an effective letter on your behalf. An expansive letter full of praise should flow if you choose recommenders who are very familiar with your personality and skills. If they have seen you work through different academic and extracurricular capacities, they won't be grasping for straws on what to write. Admissions officers can tell from vivid details that this is a teacher who's seen your growth closely and has many stories to tell about your qualifications as an applicant.