The school counselor letter of recommendation plays a crucial role in the evaluation of college applications, especially in the highly selective admission process.

What do admission officers look for in a school counselor letter, and does that differ from expectations for a teacher letter? Are there ways to frame letters to best highlight the accomplishments and qualities that define each unique individual? How can your letters be most effective in the admission process?

With more competitive applications than places available, holistic admission practices take into account multiple factors beyond quantitative measures. In addition to assessing ability to do the academic work, admission officers are looking for students who will join in and contribute to the campus community in a variety of ways. They seek to understand the home, school and local context of each applicant for clues about resilience, stamina, perseverance and maturity. Particularly for campuses with residential settings, character traits such as flexibility, openness, honesty and self-control are also vitally important. Admission officers turn to the school counselor letter for evidence of impact on community, background factors that may have affected performance and insight into a student’s character.

Following are some recommendation-letter-writing ideas gleaned from workshops hosted on the Stanford campus and at venues across the country during professional development programs conducted by Stanford’s admission staff. Although many formats are effective, some practical tips to structure a useful letter are outlined below.

Provide contextual information and explain unusual circumstances: The school counselor letter is a key source of information about a student’s context. If your community or school setting is unusual or you have programs that need explanation, for example a recently implemented magnet program or a new school with a first graduating class, describe them briefly to set the scene or refer the reader to your school profile.

If your school counseling load is exceptionally heavy, admission officers do not expect the same level of intimate knowledge about a student as one whom you have known well for years. Feel free to share this information in a sentence or two.

Not all students share their personal stories with you, but for those who do, family circumstances that have affected a student’s ability to function in school may be helpful in understanding context. Is there something in the candidate’s background that has contributed to his or her development in either a positive or a restrictive way? Perhaps socio-economic status, family dynamics, recent moves or exceptional outside responsibilities have tested and strengthened a student’s resolve. Conversely, they may have caused an uncharacteristic blip on the record or held the student back in some way. Can you describe how the student copes under pressure to help readers understand what to expect from the student in the future?

Less personal but equally important, if outside events have affected the academic record in some way (issues with faculty, staffing or scheduling conflicts), admission officers look to you for explanation and clarification. Even if a student explains these issues on the application, admission officers appreciate your confirmation as well.

Describe impact on the school or local community: A college community is made up of individuals who play a wide variety of roles; therefore many institutions actively seek students with strong personal traits. If a student demonstrates sustained leadership, whether it is conferred by a title or simply through strength of character, you have the perspective to see how that leadership plays out in your school and possibly the wider

7 TIPS FOR FOR WRITING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Writing recommendation letters for students doesn’t have to be scary. Follow these tips to make sure your letters are communicating the important information.

BY DEBRA VON BARGEN
Admission officers are trained to read for nuance. They notice the words, phrases and examples you use. They try to tune in to the level of your enthusiasm when you describe a young person’s accomplishments or impact.

Focus on significant contributions: For colleges that use the Common Application and for most institution-specific applications, there is already a section on the student’s part that lists activities. Readers do not need to see that list twice. Rather, they look to you to corroborate outstanding achievements or to explain the impact of a student’s involvement with clubs, teams, publications, student government, community service and the like. Keep in mind that not everything a student commits to is an organized activity. It may be a job, a hobby or a family obligation that absorbs someone’s attention or constitutes a deep involvement. In the most selective settings, readers are looking for depth and commitment, so explaining in more detail the activities with the most impact can create a more powerful impression than a litany of student memberships.

Give examples of pursuit of deepest interests: Readers are on the lookout for areas that applicants are so interested in they cannot stop themselves from following as many leads as time and resources allow. Interests run the gamut from intellectual fascination with philosophy to a drive to help a kindergartener learn to read. If the student you are writing about has a deep interest, find a way to highlight that pursuit with specific examples about the extent to which he or she has foregone other activities or excelled beyond expectations because of pure curiosity and desire.

Consider whether to include brief quotes: Admission officers prefer to learn about an applicant from your perspective, not from a compendium of quotes. They are relying on you to give a broad overview of the student in the larger context of the school or community and to explain how interactions and activities fit into that larger context. Therefore, use quotes only when they are so succinct and targeted that they convey your thoughts more concisely and vividly than you would do on your own.

Stick to essentials: Most admission officers are responsible for large territories and hundreds or even thousands of applications to review in a limited time. How can you draw their attention to your key points? First, be clear in your own mind about what is most important to convey about an applicant. Then think about where you will place that information in your letter. It is natural to look at the beginning of a document for clues to the content and then at the end for a summation or conclusion. These are two good places to focus your most powerful statements.

Be honest and transparent: With the advent of application systems that are not institution-specific and with the implementation of electronic submission processes, crafting one letter to serve for all colleges has become the norm. However, not every college on a student’s list fits the student in the same way. How can one letter serve for multiple situations?

Admission officers are trained to read for nuance. They notice the words, phrases and examples you use. They try to tune in to the level of your enthusiasm when you describe a young person’s accomplishments or impact. They pay attention when you talk about situations in which a student is likely to thrive. You can find creative ways to tell them in all honesty that this student really adds to small-group settings where he or she can emerge as a leader; another student is happy to plunge into new and challenging opportunities and isn’t afraid to fail.

If there is something you are unable or unwilling to put in a letter, you may ask the admission officer to contact you offline. In the final stages when a file is being considered for admission, they will likely contact you.

Help Teachers Write

Many of the above tips are useful for teacher letters as well as school counselor letters. However, the two types of letters should provide complementary but distinct viewpoints. The school counselor letter describes the student in the broader perspective by including context, impact, exceptional accomplishments, challenges overcome and the student’s role locally. The teacher letter, in contrast, is more narrowly focused on the student’s academic characteristics and role in the classroom. Outside activities need to be referenced only when they have some impact on the student’s classroom participation. As you help teachers craft their letters, have them consider the following tips.

• When choosing what to highlight, think about what you, as an instructor, would like to know about this student’s ability, attitude and engagement in a classroom. Then frame your message as if you were writing to the student’s future professor to describe these attributes.

• Focus on academic accomplishment and intellectual potential. Does the student have outstanding natural ability? Does he or she have well-developed work habits? What is the student’s learning style and level of intellectual vitality?

• Be as specific as possible when discussing academic strengths. “Smart” and “bright” describe many college as-
pirants. Singling out specific traits and abilities to differentiate among top students makes a letter most valuable.

- Interpersonal relations, while not purely academic, play a role in every classroom and can be included in an effective teacher letter. How does the student’s presence affect the class dynamic?

- Occasionally, a student’s extracurricular commitments affect classroom performance. If this is the case or if the teacher has first-hand knowledge of the activity, some mention may be appropriate. Otherwise, trust the student and school counselor to cover this aspect in other parts of the application.

**Proof, Proof, Proof**

And finally, here are some proofreading tips before you and your teachers upload your documents. Depending on your advisee/student load and the nature of your school setting, there may be parts of your letters that remain fairly constant; for example you may need to explain a curriculum change or a major local event that affected the entire class or school community. However, because admission officers often read school groups together, a boilerplate format quickly becomes evident and diminishes the impact your support was meant to have.

- Pay attention to personal pronouns, be consistent with course titles, and avoid confusing double negatives.
- Be ruthless with extraneous material. Some of the most powerful letters are quite brief, but they have impact because they focus on only the key aspects of a student’s profile.
- Active verbs, specific language and vivid descriptions all serve to bring out highlights of your student’s past history and future potential. Pick a few truly descriptive adjectives and support your choice with observations or examples.
- Use superlatives sparingly and carefully. There is a difference among best ever, best in the school, best in this class.
- Reasonable attention to standard writing convention makes a letter readable, but even bullet lists will do if the information is there and clear. Admission officers are evaluating the student, not the recommender’s writing style.

As admission officers, we are grateful for the tremendous amount of good work you do on behalf of your students. We fully recognize the extraordinary effort it takes to help young people discover their strengths, find their paths among an ever-expanding array of choices and express themselves clearly and honestly in their applications. We hope these letter-writing tips will help streamline one of the many tasks ahead of you and demonstrate that, like you, we strive for clear and open communication. Your dedication to expanding opportunities for all students is a goal we share, and we view you as irreplaceable colleagues in this effort.

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