

Writing Character- Conscious Letters of Recommendation: Tips for High School Counselors and Teachers

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This resource is intended for high school counselors and teachers who write student letters of recommendation (LOR) for college admission or other post-secondary programs. A template is included that suggests a variety of information points that are important to colleges; applicant character and personal experiences and traits are prominently featured.

The goals of this document are two-fold. The first is to offer tips and recommendations for teachers and counselors to write letters of recommendation focused on student character and life experiences that will provide additional context. And secondly to offer a letter of recommendation template and examples that highlight information useful to colleges, including thoughtful descriptions of student character and experiences.

How to use this template

- This template is long, in part because it suggests all of the types of things a recommender could talk about. Your LOR need not be this long. A short, authentic, specific letter is better than a generic, long one.
- Edit away! The template below may be useful in identifying some types of information important to colleges, but not all information will be relevant to your school and students.
- This template is written with counselors in mind. Teachers can build from the information in the template to shed light on students' unique experiences, character and behaviors, specifically within the classroom setting.
- Bullets offer an effective, succinct way of communicating. While narrative/prose is popular when writing letters of recommendation, bullets share key information in a simple, easy-to-read way, which many colleges appreciate.

Incorporating character

In your letter, think about how you will represent the student's unique attributes, skills, and experiences. What does the student bring to your school community and what will they bring to a college campus? How are they described by others? How are they different from other students? See below for sample narrative excerpts that highlight students' unique character strengths.

If you don't know a student well, provide opportunities to connect and/or glean this information from other sources.

- Ask the student to share their college admission essays with you or other personal essays that they've written as part of their coursework
- Ask the student's teachers or faculty advisor to share a few thoughts about their contributions in class and to the school community
- Ask additional school staff (coaches, librarian, office administrator, etc.) to offer words about the student
- Ask parents/caregivers to reflect on their child's strengths, values, and character
- Ask the student to respond to a set of simple prompts (verbal or written) that will elicit information about their values and experiences:
 - * What do you want written on your tombstone about you?
 - * What are you most proud of?
 - * What is your personal motto/credo?
 - * How do you support or give back your community (including family, friends, school)?

Access the template as a word document here:

<http://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-educators/writing-character-conscious-letters-of-recommendation>

Sample excerpts focused on character

“John exudes warmth and compassion and is sensitive in ways that are not typically celebrated in teenage boys. He is fiercely loyal, charismatic, and he cares deeply about not only his immediate friends and family, but also the larger global community. He recognizes that he has been fortunate in his upbringing to have opportunities to travel and benefit from unique experiences and he feels that he has a responsibility to ‘pay it forward,’ or live a life that is rooted in service to others.”

"Jane radiates kindness. Ambitious, curious and deeply thoughtful, she is a changemaker who has significantly impacted her school community. Always surrounded by friends, Jane derives her energy from personal interaction and from service to others. When she sets her mind to something, she goes full tilt and her work ethic and level of commitment is impressive. While many students talk and dream about making a difference, when Jane articulates her aspirations of serving her community and beyond as an advocate and human rights worker, she does so with conviction and passion. A loyal friend and a perceptive listener, Jane has a wonderful sense for human nature. She is funny and laid back but also a strong, driven, independent individual. She is poised to make a significant impact in college and is eager to have the freedom to study subjects that intrigue her while potentially preparing for law school or diplomatic service. We offer our highest recommendation for this dynamic young woman."

“Honesty, open-mindedness, and hard work.’ This was John’s response when asked about what he values most. It is spot on, as he is a young man who is straightforward and non-judgmental. If high school is about learning, growing, and self-discovery, then he is on a path to success. In a class of high-powered, vocal, intellectual boys, it would be easy to be intimidated. John is gaining the confidence necessary to be successful. John is a young version of the mad scientist. Once he finds an area or an idea of interest, everything else falls away. Thus, his blessing and curse in high school has been his passion for learning, while devoting sufficient attention to areas that are not as readily of interest to him. He has learned the importance of consistency across pursuits and is ready for a fresh start in college.”

“If schools are looking for individuals and the type of student who likes to play the devil's advocate, then Jane is your clear choice. She has emerged as the girl in class who will quietly and graciously test other people’s assumptions. She will become an adult of deep passion and talent, and as she grows will be a welcome addition to a college campus. If high school is about being able to stumble, gain self-awareness, and pick one’s self back up, then she is on a path to success. Coming from a small town public middle school where a third of her classmates went on to fail in high school, Jane’s preparation was not what she and her family had hoped for. Despite this lack of foundation, when she arrived in high school, she was excited by the challenge and bolstered by engaged faculty who were genuinely interested in her as a learner. She is increasingly gaining the academic and character skills necessary to be successful.”

"Jane is a breath of fresh air. Compassionate, balanced, unique and ultra positive, she is a young woman with wisdom, grace and maturity beyond her years. She is as bright as she is thoughtful and serves as the de facto 'mother' of the senior class. Jane is one of those people that you hope to cross paths with each day. If that happens, you know you will smile, and you also know that there would be at least one person that day who truly cares about how you are doing. Even if she was not a successful student, which she surely is, this caring approach to her fellow human beings would make her a successful person."

"Secure and well grounded, his kindness and intellect are readily shared with those around him. John's values are true traditional values where one helps their neighbor and is not afraid to get a little dirty doing so. Humble and mature, he will bring great energy, dedication and good will to his college community."

College Counselor Recommendation Template

(School Logo Here)

Student Full Name
School Name Class Of 2020

DISTINCTIVE QUALITIES

Start with a story that highlights the student’s intellectual curiosity, engagement in community, ethical character, and commitment to others. Is there a notable quality or experience that this student has that distinguishes them from others? Who is this student in your school community and what do they have to offer a college campus both in the classroom and out? What word would friends, staff, and family use to describe the applicant (e.g., thoughtful, resilient, funny, focused, etc.)?

ACADEMIC HISTORY & INTERESTS

- When did the student enroll at your school? Where were they coming from?
- What courses and experiences have they taken advantage of academically?
- Are there any special notes about your school’s curriculum that need highlighting?
- Are there specific circumstances about a student’s course program that should be articulated?
- How has the student challenged themselves and how demanding are the courses they have chosen?
- Does the student know what they want to study in college or have specific academic interests that should be shared?
- Were there certain courses that the student wanted to take but could not because of scheduling or another conflict?
- What words do teachers usually use to describe the student (e.g., “curious” “fluid writer”, etc.)

ACTIVITIES & INTERESTS

- In what ways has the student been involved at school? Is the student an athlete, artist, musician, or part of some other group on campus?
- In what ways has the student been involved outside of school? Are they active in a church community, service, athletics, or local organization of note?
- What does the student do in the summers?
- Does the student have any special interests or talents?
- What impact has the student made?
- Have they received any recognition for their involvement?

- Why does the applicant do what they do?
- How sustained has their involvement been?
- Has the student held a job?
- Are there ways that the student has demonstrated leadership, either formally or informally?
- How has the student shown concern for others and/or contributed to their community?

PERSONAL HISTORY & FAMILY/COMMUNITY CONTEXT

- Does the student have siblings? Are they in, or have they graduated from, college?
- Are there any family dynamics or experiences that need to be mentioned?
- Does the applicant have significant responsibilities at home (e.g., caring for a sibling or elderly relative)?
- Are there other factors in a student's upbringing, living situation, and/or community that would be helpful in providing context for the student, opportunities they have or have not had, and any possible adversities or challenges they have faced?

SUMMARY

This is an opportunity to provide a final snapshot of the student and what they have to offer a college. What are their hopes for the future, how will they contribute and why should the college accept this student? This might include a quote from the student, a final story, or thoughts from a faculty advisor. What do you want the reader to remember about the applicant? Is the student highly recommended?

HIGHLIGHTS FROM TEACHERS' COMMENTS

Class #1 Title: "Brief teacher comment about student as a learner"

Class #2 Title: "Brief teacher comment about student as a learner"

Class #3 Title: "Brief teacher comment about student as a learner"

Respectfully Submitted,

Date:

Counselor's Name:

Position Title:

School Name:

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Last reviewed July 2020.

From Ross Anderson, T. & Weissbourd, R. (2020). Character assessment in college admission: A guide of best practices with accompanying resources. Retrieved from <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu>

Access our full suite of character assessment in college admission resources: <http://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-colleges/character-assessment-college-admission-guide-overview>

Making Caring Common Project
Harvard Graduate School of Education
14 Appian Way
Cambridge, MA 02138

Email us with feedback, questions, or to learn more:
CollegeAdmissions@MakingCaringCommon.org

www.makingcaringcommon.org

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