



How to get great letters of recommendation

1. Think carefully about who would write you the best recommendations.

The teachers should know you well and in a positive light. This doesn't mean you're limited to teachers who have given you A's; any junior-year English, math, science, or social studies teacher who can attest to your curiosity, your work ethic, your perseverance, or your contributions to discussion will be a good teacher to ask.

2. In spring of junior year, find an appropriate time to ask two or three teachers if they'd be willing to write you a recommendation in the fall.

An appropriate time would generally be before or after school. If the teacher seems busy, it's not a good time to ask. In the spring, you're only asking if they'd be willing to write it when you start working on college applications in the fall.

3. Send a brief thank-you email to each teacher individually to confirm that you'll follow-up in the fall.

This can be really simple: "Thank you for agreeing to write my college recommendation. I'll follow up at the start of senior year with all the details." Check spelling (especially the teacher's name) and punctuation. Sign it with your first and last name.

4. In early fall, send separate, individualized formal requests for a recommendation with full details.

Any time you send an email, make sure that the tone is appropriately respectful, that it has all the relevant information, and that you have proofread for sentence structure, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Be sure to sign it.

The email should include a respectful form of address ("Dear Ms. Doe" or just "Ms. Doe"—but make it clear you know who you're writing to), your request for a recommendation, why you think this teacher would have good things to say about you, and an idea of when the recommendation needs to be submitted ("I'm applying Early Action to Cool U. and the deadline is November 1, but I hope to have everything in by October 15"). Ask them what they'd like to have from you, such as a résumé or essay. I always asked for an essay that included revealing anecdotes about our interactions.

5. Give teachers at least two weeks to write the letter of recommendation.

Teachers are busy and used to multitasking, but remember that, at least in public schools, they aren't required or paid to write recommendations. Some students wait till the last minute on everything, including getting their college applications done. Don't contact a teacher and say that you need a recommendation tomorrow!

6. Once you see that the letter has been uploaded, write an email (following the suggestions in #4) thanking them for the recommendation.

You don't get to see what the teacher has written, but if you selected wisely, you can assume it will focus on the positives. Later, when all your recommendations are in, write formal thank-you notes on real paper notecards—in pen, not pencil—and, if you wish, give a small gift, but gifts are not necessary or expected. Most teachers just want to know you appreciated the time and care they put into your recommendation.

If you do give a little gift, make it personal. Students who noticed that I liked drinking coffee gave me coffee mugs or Starbucks gift cards.

7. Once colleges start giving you their decisions, tell your recommenders which schools accepted you and, when you've decided, which school you will attend in the fall.

They cared enough to write the letter for you; they care about where you will be once you've left the nest of high school.

Keep in mind that you are asking the teacher for a favor, and act accordingly—with respect and gratitude.