



How to Craft Great Recommendation Letters for the Admission Process at Highly Selective Colleges and Universities in the United States

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Session Outline

- **Topics to be covered during this session:**
 - Highly Selective Universities in the U.S.
 - The importance of the letter of recommendation.
 - The difference your recommendation and the teacher recommendation can make in the application process.
 - The great opportunity you have when writing these letters.
 - Review actual letters (Average to excellent letters)
 - Questions and Answers -- Discussion



Definition

- **Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary:**
 - **Recommendation**

To present as worthy of acceptance or trial, to endorse as fit, worthy, or competent.



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2010 US NEW Ranking by Selectivity

<u>US New Ranks</u>	<u>University Name</u>	<u>Student Selectivity</u>
3	Yale University	1
1	Harvard University	2
1	Princeton University	2
4	Cal. Institute of Tech.	2
4	MIT	2
4	University of Pennsylvania	6
12	Washington University	6
8	Columbia University	8
4	Stanford University	9
16	Brown University	9
11	Dartmouth College	11
10	Duke University	12

<u>US New Ranks</u>	<u>University Name</u>	<u>Student Selectivity</u>
23	Georgetown University	12
21	University of Calif.- Berkeley	14
8	University of Chicago	15
12	Northwestern University	15
15	Cornell University	15
17	Emory University	15
20	University of Notre Dame	15
17	Rice University	20
17	Vanderbilt University	20
14	Johns Hopkins University	24
24	University of Calif. - Los Angeles	24
24	University of Virginia	29
22	Carnegie Mellon University	32



Vanderbilt University

SELECTIVITY LEVEL	ACT	SAT
Highly Selective	25–30	1710–2000
Selective	21–26	1470–1770
Traditional	18–24	1290–1650
Liberal	17–22	1230–1530
Open	16–21	1170–1480

Source: 2009 ACT Institutional Data File

36 Point ACT Scale
2400 SAT Scale



Overview

- **What you are writing is not the same type of letter that a teacher writes. However you may serve as a critical resource for the teacher when they are writing the recommendation**
 - The teacher works directly with the student on a daily basis for at least a full academic year.
 - You may meet the student only a few times.
 - your statement is based on data and perceptions you have collected from others (teachers, coaches, club advisers, etc) on behalf of the student.
 - In your writing, you need to anticipate the questions the admissions reader will have.
 - In order to gain insight regarding the applicant, they need to know details about the student's performance and character.



Importance

- **The more selective the college or university, the more important your letters and statements of evaluation become in the admissions process.**
- **Evaluations allow the Admission Committee to:**
 - Go beyond the academic measures (SAT, ACT, IB, national exams, GPA, class rank, rigor of courses, etc.).
 - Have strong sense of what the applicant would contribute to the college campus.
 - Have insight into the intangibles.



Necessity

- **Letters and Statements of Evaluation Provide:**
 - A third-party perspective on a student (pulls the entire application together – triangulation of data).
 - An opportunity to present a student's strengths and weaknesses in confidence.
 - An instrument through which you may address additional information (you may want to check your school policy regarding disciplinary disclosures).



Necessity (Continued)

- **Letters of Evaluation also provide:**
 - A chance for you to speak about the intangibles:
 - Intellectual ability and aptitude
 - Reaction to setbacks or criticism
 - Creativity
 - Relative maturity
 - Inquiring attitude of mind
 - Level of engagement
 - How this student has made a difference



Purpose

- **Your job:**
 - Your job is not to explain why the applicant is a perfect fit for a particular university.
 - Your job is to present a complete picture of the candidate based on information you gathered and interactions you have had with the candidate.



Opportunity

- **This is your chance:**

- Be the student's advocate and provide the overview.
- Be truthful and forthcoming. Write the strongest, most-candid statement possible about the student. Recognize that you must make note of and explain issues and problems during the high school career (i.e. dip in grades sophomore year: sickness? Family crisis? Fell in love?).
- All letters will be read, transcript in hand, so be specific.
- Because most highly selective universities read by territory, the same admissions officer will read every letter you write for every student – make each letter different and specific to the applicant.



Attention to Detail

- **Steps to success:**
 - Have student's transcript in hand.
 - Ask the student for insight into his or her high school career.
 - Speak to experiences or circumstances beyond the high school walls.
 - State in what capacity and for how long you know the student – on the form.



Excellence

- **Excellent letters of recommendation:**
 - Contain specific examples of the student going beyond the norm within their world.
 - Speak to a student's great accomplishments.
 - Clearly show you as the student's advocate.
 - Differentiate your student from the others.
 - Show your sincerity, passion, and authenticity.
 - Have been spell-checked (grammar).
 - Stick to the context in which YOU know the student or clarify that you do not and cite your source of information.
 - Are written official letterhead and are attached to the college's form, etc.



From Average to Excellent

- **The following slides offer two examples:**
 - **The first example is an average letter of recommendation**
 - **The second example is an excellent letter of recommendation**



Average

- **An average letter:**

To Whom It May Concern:

It is my great pleasure to write a letter of recommendation for _____. I have known for the past 3 years. _____ has been a very involved individual in her school and in community organizations. She is a very conscientious young lady who continues to receive the respect and admiration of her peers and teachers. She is considered to be a mature student who accepts responsibility and challenge in her school and community.

To state her service and commitment to her community _____ volunteers to promote relations between the _____ and American community by translating documents from _____ to English. She also plans and organizes events in the _____ community through Host Nations program. Additionally, _____ volunteers in her church as a Sunday school assistant and Youth service trainer.

She is a member of the National Honor Society, captain of the cheering leading team, and captain of the varsity tennis team. _____ is quite versatile and committed to the educational environment; she displays leadership skills, hard work ethics, and integrity in all areas.

She will make an excellent additions to any college community.

Problems with this letter:

- Basically says nothing that we don't already know from transcript.
- Gives no insight into leadership.
- Gives no insight into course load or intensity.
- Very vague, general statements without enthusiasm or multi-dimensional, intangible aspects of the student.



Excellent

- **Here is an excellent letter:**

_____ students in general are extremely extroverted individuals, charming, outgoing and often within a very short encounter, you are able to discover many of the points that make them unique. Not so, with _____ as he is an individual with whom time spent is meant to be savored and enjoyed over time, a brilliant young man who lets you know him bit by bit and the more you get to know him the more you find yourself wanting to know more. To be honest, he may well be the most gifted student intellectually in the class although his style is so understated that he can be overlooked for more dominating students in the classroom. But do take the time to know him as I have done and you will be greatly enhanced by his presence, just as the communities in which he lives here in _____ have been.

_____ is well-respected by our faculty, particularly by those who take the time for discussion and interaction with students rather than simply lecture, for it is in those academic settings where his presence makes the largest impact. His English teacher writes: "A nationally ranked tennis player in _____, I have always thought that he brings his professional dedication and focus to school with him, for he appears older than his years and far more collected. He does not participate very frequently, but he is never without words to comment. He is one of those students who – at any moment – can be expected to provide that one answer a teacher needs to seal off a discussion topic and move on to the next point.

- **Highlights of this letter:**

- Speaks to the students aptitude and depth of character.
- Speaks of maturity level.
- Tells what the student brings to the classroom – intellectual ability and level of engagement.
- Implies that the student is a deep thinker and reflective in thought.



Excellent

• The excellent letter continues:

He is deceptively intelligent and quick in thought, and I think he has occasionally felt at odds with his classmates because of it.”

He is a reflective, thoughtful young man who takes the time to evaluate his own actions and his own value system. _____’s recent involvement in co-founding a new charitable organization in _____ helped him to understand why genuine politicians and philanthropists do what they do and how selfish he had been previously in being content to live in his “little world” with his own friends and family. This type of soul-searching is unusual in my opinion as most of his peers are too busy competing for high grades, studying for SAT exams or too wrapped up in their own material world to take the time for quiet reflection, take a deep breath and make time for self-evaluation.

Not surprisingly, _____ is a top student with a cumulative average of 4.48 out of 5.0 and despite the increasing rigor of his academic program; _____ has increased his grades each year of the high school program. Even more impressive is the challenge he has sought academically, choosing to take two science subjects, Physics and Chemistry at the Higher Level along with Higher Level Economics. Although he has particular interests in math and science, his talents and interests cross the curriculum and he one of our strongest English students as well as excelling in his own language, social science and humanities classes.

• Highlights of this letter:

- Speaks to his intellectual maturity beyond his years.
- Explains how the student is making a difference in his world, and the student’s ability to look beyond himself for greater good.
- Speaks about academic success and diversity of thought using specifics.



Excellent

• The excellent letter continues:

His standardized testing is very competitive and includes a 760 Critical Reading score, 650 Writing score, 750 in Chemistry and 730 on the Math 1 exam.

And it is important to realize that _____ accomplishes all that he does while at the same time maintaining an active tennis career. He has national ranking in _____ and is a member of a club team as well as captain of the _____ team. _____ practices two to three hours a day after school and much of the weekend but never uses his tennis commitments as an excuse at school. In fact, like many of the athletes I have worked with, _____ is incredibly focused and has perfected his time management skills, and I believe that having to learn to balance his academic and extracurricular activities at a young age, has contributed to his self-confidence and maturity. I agree with his English teacher's comments about his seeming older as his interactions with me are more like that of a colleague; he is focused, always comes to our meetings prepared and never wastes time or words and in fact is an ideal student to work with.

_____ differs from the other nationally-ranked athletes I have worked with in that he does not focus all his extracurricular life around that sport. For example, _____'s involvement in the boss Association is really quite extraordinary

• Highlights of this letter:

- Explains dedication to his sport and the time it requires.
- Speaks to level of engagement and maturity – his ability to be professional.
- Speaks to well-rounded person overall – not just dedicated to tennis, but also to other interests and areas.



Excellent

• The excellent letter concludes:

. _____ and a friend, as a result of volunteer work at the _____ Rehabilitation Center, became deeply concerned that not enough was being done in his country to improve living conditions for the physically disabled. In response, they went through official government channels and founded their own charitable organization, overcoming many obstacles placed in their path by the tremendous _____ bureaucracy to eventually initiate a new NGO devoted to improving the lives of the handicapped in _____. He has spent many hours on this project and already initiated a variety of programs including holding a charity concert by a well-known regional orchestra which earned over \$8,000 through ticket sales which was used to create a toy library at the rehabilitation center. _____ has also worked as a volunteer computer teacher at a foundation that provides supportive education to underprivileged children and is a columnist for several school newspapers in addition to making time for his special interests in sailing and photography.

I believe _____ to be truly one of the most gifted young people in the senior class. If admitted, _____ has much to gain but also much to give to your living and learning community through his efforts both in and out of class. _____ is a very special young person and to be honest, a personal favorite who I would very much like to see him as a member of your freshman class in the fall. He has my utmost support for admission.

• Highlights of this letter:

- Speaks to student's ability to go the extra step to create change and make a difference in the world around him.
- Speaks to his time management by being able to be incredibly active in his community while maintaining academic excellence.
- The author of the letter shows his enthusiasm and sincerity in his support of this student.



Finishing Touches

- **After the letter is written:**
 - Have student waive right to see the letter – you can give letter to student if you wish – your decision.
 - Keep an electronic or hard copy of all letters you submit.
 - Make sure your signature is everywhere that requires it.
 - Let the student know the letter has been sent.



Remember

- **Your letters build credibility and a relationship with The Office of Admissions.**
- **We will notice if you use the same letter for more than one student!!**
- **Your evaluation gives the overview of the school and the student and provide us specifics that give us insight into the student and his world**



Appreciation

- **College admissions officers truly appreciate the time, effort, and personal investment it takes you to write letters of evaluation.**
- **They make all the difference in our admission process – please know they are worth every minute you spend on them! Thank you!**





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Common Application Form

TO THE SECONDARY SCHOOL COUNSELOR

Attach applicant's official transcript, including courses in progress, a school profile, and transcript legend. (Check transcript copies for readability.) Use both pages to complete your evaluation for this student. **Be sure to sign below.**

Counselor's name (Mr./Ms./Dr., etc.) _____
Please print or type

Signature _____ Date _____
mm/dd/yyyy

Title _____ School _____

School address _____
City/Town State/Province Country ZIP/Postal Code

Counselor's phone (_____) _____
Area Code Number

Counselor's fax (_____) _____
Area Code Number

Secondary school CEEB/ACT code _____ Counselor's e-mail _____

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Background Information

Class rank: _____ Class size: _____ Covering a period from _____ to _____
(mm/yyyy) (mm/yyyy)

The rank is weighted unweighted. How many students share this rank? _____

We do not rank. Instead, please indicate quartile _____ quintile _____ decile _____

Cumulative GPA: _____ on a _____ scale, covering a period from _____ to _____
(mm/yyyy) (mm/yyyy)

This GPA is weighted unweighted. The school's passing mark is _____

Highest GPA in class _____ Graduation date _____
(mm/dd/yyyy)

Percentage of graduating class immediately attending: _____ four-year _____ two-year institutions

Are classes taken on a block schedule Yes No

Is the applicant an IB Diploma candidate? Yes No

If you offer AP courses, do you limit the number a student can take? Yes No

How many AP courses does your school offer (in total)? _____

In comparison with other college preparatory students at your school, the applicant's course selection is:

most demanding
 very demanding
 demanding
 average
 below average

How long have you known this student and in what context? _____

What are the first words that come to your mind to describe this student? _____



VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

Common Application Form

Ratings Compared to other students in his or her class year, how do you rate this student in terms of:

No basis		Below average	Average	Good (above average)	Very good (well above average)	Excellent (top 10%)	Outstanding (top 5%)	One of the top few I've encountered (top 1%)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Academic achievement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Extracurricular accomplishments	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Personal qualities and character	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	OVERALL	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Evaluation Please write whatever you think is important about this student, including a description of academic, extracurricular, and personal characteristics. We welcome a broad-based assessment that will help us to differentiate this student from others. (Feel free to attach an additional sheet or another reference you may have prepared on behalf of this student.)

- ① Has the applicant ever been found responsible for a disciplinary violation at your school from 9th grade (or the international equivalent) forward, whether related to academic misconduct or behavioral misconduct, that resulted in the applicant's probation, suspension, removal, dismissal, or expulsion from your institution? Yes No
- ② To your knowledge, has the applicant ever been convicted of a misdemeanor, felony, or other crime? Yes No

If you answered yes to either or both questions, please attach a separate sheet of paper or use your written recommendation to give the approximate date of each incident and explain the circumstances.

Check here if you would prefer to discuss this applicant over the phone with each admission office.

I recommend this student: No basis With reservation Fairly strongly Strongly Enthusiastically

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