



## How to Secure the Best Letters of Recommendation

To secure the strongest letters of recommendation, you will need to **work hard in your recommenders' classes**. The most powerful letters come from impressing your teachers, exceeding their expectations, and convincing them that, for you, learning is fun and exciting. Frankly, most letters of recommendation do little to help an applicant—they are just too bland and generic. You want to be part of the 10% that does make a difference. Strive to have your teachers say, “This student made such a difference in my classroom this year.”

Some ways you can achieve that goal:

- Care about the material you are learning; show enthusiasm.
- Work diligently and consistently. Hand in all your homework, projects and papers on time.
- Ask insightful questions and participate actively in class. Try thinking of some questions the night before.
- Pay attention *all* the time. (Sitting in the front of the room helps!) Every moment in class is a chance to help or hurt the recommendation that teacher will write.
- Help out your classmates, be gracious.
- Take grades in stride. Send the message that learning is more important than the grade.
- Stay for extra help when you need it.
- Be polite! In fact, try to act consistently in ways that would lead a recommender to describe you as “curious,” “mature,” “good-natured,” and “perceptive.”

But a recommendation letter is not only about your behavior in class; it is actually the **summation of a relationship** – one that might span one or two or even three years. The road to securing a great recommendation begins long before you ask a teacher to write for you. Developing relationships with teachers can result in more than strong recommendations, though. The process often leads to better learning and higher grades – and you can use those skills to see the same outcomes in college. For these reasons you might want to try to develop better relationships with *all* your teachers. So take an opportunity to chat before or after class about

- Last night's news
- Tomorrow's reading
- The teacher's favorite book
- An extracurricular pursuit you have in common
- How did you come to teach your subject?

Not every teacher will be receptive to your outreach efforts, but you can focus on those that are.

One other thing: Are you aware that **your counselor will also write you a college recommendation** – whether or not the person even knows who you are? If possible, try to establish some type of



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relationship with him or her this year as well. This can be harder, because you aren't in class with this person regularly. Some things you might try:

- Make an appointment, or take advantage of required one-on-one meetings.
- Talk about your courses, your activities, your life, your future goals, what you value
- Stop in to visit during your lunch period to follow up
- In general, be open with this person about asking on advice on which courses to take and colleges to apply to. The school counselor can almost always offer insight into which students from your high school do well with which colleges.

**Finally, just to provide some inspiration, here are some things you hope your teachers could say about *you* by the end of the year:**

- “I would be remiss if I did not address Leander the person. In a word, he is a gentleman. You will not find a more polite and respectful young person. Always ready to lend a helping hand, quick to offer a cheerful greeting, Leander is someone you just want to be around. As his teammates on the track team or his fellow musicians in the jazz band will tell you, Leander’s prodigious talents are only surpassed by his affable and generous nature. In short, he would be a welcome addition to any group of which he becomes a member.”
- “In teaching Alex, not only did I learn first hand just how tremendously motivated this young man actually was, but I also got to see a glimpse of his character and his integrity. Occasionally, I would assign students to groups and have them work on Calculus problems together. Alex was a very productive member every time. There would be days when he would lead the way for his group, and other days when he would purposely slow down in order to help out a struggling group member. In addition, as the dean of the junior class, I had the chance to work with Alex on a community service project that involved cleaning up a nearby neighborhood. The hard work I saw in the classroom also was present during this project.”
- “In addition to Sam’s strong academic work, she has one of the most pleasant personalities I have seen in my 12 years of teaching. She is friendly, polite, and well respected by her peers and her teachers. She personifies our school motto ‘Integrity in all things’ as a member of our school’s honor committee. She leads by example and has many followers.”