How to Ask for a Recommendation Letter

A strong letter of recommendation can meaningfully strengthen your application. The key is asking the right people, asking early, and giving them everything they need to write something truly compelling.

Who to Ask

Most colleges require **2 teacher recommendations** and **1 counselor recommendation**. Some schools allow or require an additional letter from a coach, mentor, or employer.

Choose teachers who:

- Taught you in **11th or 12th grade** (junior year teachers are ideal)
- Know you well beyond just your grade — they've seen you participate, struggle, grow, or lead
- Taught a subject **relevant to your intended major** (e.g., a science teacher if you're pre-med)
- Have seen you at your best — in discussion, on projects, or during office hours

Avoid asking:

- Teachers from 9th grade (too long ago)
- Teachers whose class you barely participated in
- Family friends or relatives (even if they're teachers)
- Anyone who seems hesitant or unenthusiastic when you ask

When to Ask

Ask by the end of junior year — ideally in April or May, before summer break. This gives your recommenders the entire summer to write thoughtfully before the fall application rush.

- **Early Decision / Early Action applicants:** Ask no later than **September of senior year**
- **Regular Decision applicants:** Ask no later than **October of senior year**
- Give recommenders a minimum of **4–6 weeks** before any deadline
- The earlier you ask, the better the letter tends to be

⚠️ **Never ask a teacher the week before a deadline.** Rushed letters are generic letters. Give your recommenders enough time to write something thoughtful and specific.

How to Ask

Ask **in person first** — don't lead with an email. A face-to-face conversation shows respect and gives them the chance to say no gracefully if they don't feel they can write you a strong letter.

What to say:

> *"I really enjoyed your class and I feel like you know me well as a student. I'm applying to college this fall and I was hoping you'd be willing to write me a strong recommendation letter. Would you feel comfortable doing that?"*

Key things to listen for:

- A warm, enthusiastic “yes” — great, they’ll likely write a strong letter
- A hesitant or lukewarm response — politely thank them and ask someone else; a reluctant letter can hurt you

After they agree, follow up with a **thank-you email** and your brag sheet (see below).

What to Give Your Recommender

Make it as easy as possible for them to write a great letter. After they agree, send them a **“brag sheet”** — a one-page document with:

- Your **full name** and the schools you’re applying to
- **Deadlines** for each school (list the earliest one prominently)
- A short paragraph on **why you’re applying** and what you hope to study
- Your **top 3–5 accomplishments** or moments you’re proud of
- A story or memory from **their class** that you’d like them to highlight
- Your **resume or activities list**
- Any **specific qualities or themes** you’d like the letter to reinforce

The more context you give, the more specific — and powerful — their letter will be.

Submitting the Request Through the Application Portal

Most colleges use **Common App**, which has a built-in recommendation system:

1. Add your recommenders in the **Common App** under *Recommenders and FERPA*
2. **Waive your right to view** the letter — recommenders write more candidly, and colleges trust waived letters more
3. The system will send your recommender an **email with a link** to submit their letter directly
4. You can track submission status in your Common App dashboard
5. Send a **reminder** if the deadline is approaching and the letter hasn’t been submitted

For schools outside Common App, check each school’s portal for their specific process.

Following Up and Saying Thank You

Send a reminder 2–3 weeks before the deadline if the letter hasn’t been submitted — a short, polite email is completely appropriate.

After you hear back from schools, send each recommender a handwritten or heartfelt thank-you note. Let them know where you got in and where you’re going. Teachers invest real time and care into these letters — they genuinely want to know how your story ends.

Sample Email Template

Use this after your in-person ask to follow up with your brag sheet:

Subject: Recommendation Letter Request — [Your Name]

Hi [Teachers Name],\n\nThank you so much for agreeing to write a recommendation letter for me! It truly means a lot.\n\nIve attached my brag sheet, resume, and a list of the schools Im applying to along with their deadlines. My earliest deadline is **[date]**, so I wanted to make sure you had plenty of time.\n\nPlease let me know if you have any questions or if theres anything else I can provide. I’ll send you the official request through Common App shortly.

Thank you again — I really appreciate your support.

Warm regards,
[Your Name]

Quick Checklist

- [ ] Identified 2 teachers + 1 counselor to ask
- [ ] Asked in person before the end of junior year
- [ ] Sent brag sheet, resume, and deadline list
- [ ] Submitted official request through Common App (or school portal)
- [ ] Waived right to view the letter
- [ ] Sent reminder 2–3 weeks before deadline
- [ ] Sent thank-you note after decisions