

Letters of Recommendation

The **BIG** Idea

- How can I get a positive letter of recommendation for college?

AGENDA

Approx. 45 minutes

- I. Warm Up (5 minutes)
- II. Positive Recommendation (10 minutes)
- III. Asking for a Recommendation (10 minutes)
- IV. Recommendation Worksheet (15 minutes)
- IV. Wrap Up (5 minutes)

MATERIALS

- STUDENT HANDBOOK PAGES:**
 - Student Handbook page 150, I'm Right for the Job
 - Student Handbook pages 151–152, One Student, Two Letters
 - Student Handbook page 153, Recommendation Worksheet
- Overhead and LCD projector

OBJECTIVES

During this lesson, the student(s) will:

- Review letters of recommendation and identify important elements of a positive recommendation.
- Understand whom to ask for a recommendation, how to ask, and how to help this person write an effective letter.
- Identify someone to write a recommendation and complete a worksheet to help that person write his or her letter.

OVERVIEW

Students review the purpose of letters of recommendation for college applications. They will read examples and identify important characteristics of effective letters. Next, they will discuss steps they can take to help someone write effective references for them. Finally, they will complete a worksheet with important details about their achievements, goals, and challenges to help someone write a letter of recommendation. As a homework assignment, they will choose one person and use this worksheet to request a letter of recommendation.

PREPARATION

- List the day's **BIG IDEA** and activities on the board.
- The following handouts need to be made into overhead transparencies:
 - **Student Handbook pages 151–152, One Student, Two Letters**
 - **Student Handbook page 153, Recommendation Worksheet**
- Prior to facilitating this lesson, consult with your school counselor regarding the procedures for requesting letters of recommendation.
- Decide on how you want to handle the letter of recommendation homework assignment for students who are not applying to college. Your school counselor may have suggestions.

IMPLEMENTATION OPTIONS

In **Activity IV**, if you feel your students will need more time to complete **Student Handbook page 153, Recommendation Worksheet**, this activity could be introduced in class and assigned as homework.

ACTIVITY STEPS

I. Warm Up (5 minutes)

1. As students enter, ask them to complete **Student Handbook page 150, I'm Right for the Job**. Give them three minutes to complete the activity.
2. Discuss this activity with the class, helping them to see the importance of a recommendation and the challenges a writer may face: What was easy about this task? What was difficult? What do you think it would be like to write a recommendation for someone else?
3. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Today, we're going to talk about letters of recommendation—an important component of your college application. First, what is a letter of recommendation? Why are they important? [Let students share answers.]

There's more to you than your grades, test scores, and extracurricular activities. Letters of recommendation reveal another side of you. They describe your character and qualities that make you stand out from all the other applicants.

4. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** In today's class, we'll talk about what makes a strong letter and how to improve your chances of receiving one. We'll look at whom to ask, how to help that person write a positive letter, and how to follow up afterwards.

II. A Positive Recommendation (10 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Today, we're focusing on recommendations for college, but this will certainly not be the only recommendation letter you'll need in your life. Letters of recommendation—also called references—are required in all sorts of situations that require good character. A letter of recommendation provides insights into your past behavior as a prediction of how you might act in the future. What are some examples of times you'll need references? [Example: getting an apartment, adopting a child.]

You'll also need recommendations for future jobs. Though these references are usually done by phone instead of in writing, they are an important part of the hiring process. Employers count on these references to determine what kind of employee you'll be.

2. Have students turn to their **Student Handbook pages 151–152, One Student, Two Letters**, which provide two examples of letters of recommendation. Ask students to read both letters and underline details that might impress them if they were the admissions officers.

3. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Well, what did you think? Which letter is going to make a better impression on an admissions committee? Why? [Discuss both letters]:
 - a. Letter A: Point out that the first letter repeats information on the application. There's no depth; it gives specific qualities—"bright and hard-working"—but offers no examples to show these qualities. Also, it's missing an important component of a good letter of reference: the student's strengths *and* weaknesses.
 - b. Letter B: This letter is full of specific examples about Amelia's strengths and ways in which she overcame challenges. If the letter writer knows you well, letters of recommendation can also help explain academic problems (for example, low grades during a family illness).

III. Asking for a Recommendation (10 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Now that we know what a great recommendation looks like, how can you make sure someone writes one for you? First, think about who's writing the letter and choose the writers wisely. Ask people who know you personally through school or extracurricular activities, such as a teacher, counselor, coach, boss, or internship director. Make sure you have a positive relationship with this person.

Also keep in mind that many schools require two to three recommendations. Typically, at least one should be a teacher, ideally from a junior or senior year class. Have a back-up person in mind in case one person isn't able to write one for you.

Remember that letter writers must usually send their letters directly to the school. This demonstrates that their response is confidential. Sometimes a letter writer might choose to give you a copy so you can see all the nice things he or she said about you, but this is not required.

2. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Next, think about how you ask these people for a recommendation. Imagine I'm a student, and _____ [choose a student near you] is my math teacher. Which of these approaches do you think would be more effective?

Model the following ways of asking for a recommendation.

- a. "Yo, Mr. T. I need you to write a letter of recommendation for college. The school needs it sometime next week. You can just give it to me and I'll mail it."
- b. "Hi Mr. Thompson. I'm applying to City College and they have requested a letter of recommendation. It would be great if you could write one for me, since you know me through class and the school newspaper. The letter is due in six weeks, on November 15. If you have a few minutes some time this week, I'd like to sit down and talk with you about the letter."

3. Discuss both approaches as a class.
4. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Here are some important things to remember about requesting a recommendation letter:
 - Be clear about the details. It's helpful to let the recommender know what college you're applying to. He or she may be more or less willing to write a recommendation depending on the school(s) you're applying to. And make the deadline clear so they know when schools need to receive the letter. Always give the writer a pre-addressed stamped envelope for each college that should receive the recommendation. Some schools offer a way to submit recommendations online. If this is the case, make sure your recommender has instructions for doing so.
 - Be clear about why you've asked this person instead of others. Maybe you made significant improvement in his or her class? Perhaps he or she was the teacher advisor for an extracurricular club you were active in?
 - Give the person plenty of time. Be respectful of the person's own schedule. Give him or her at least two months. Since most applications are due in January, this means asking for letters no later than the fall (September, October) of your senior year. It is actually preferred to ask your teachers at the end of your junior year.
 - Let the person know how much you appreciate it. Don't take this for granted. After all, you're asking this person to spend a good amount of his or her own time on this letter. Be appreciative!
5. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** But here's the **most important** thing you can do to ensure an effective letter: Give the writer details that will jog his or her memory about specific projects and all your great qualities. Remember, you probably have only a handful of teachers, but every teacher may see more than a hundred students a day. A few details will help your teacher remember what you accomplished in his class, and it will be easier for him to give examples that describe you. The bottom line is this: **The more information you give the person about yourself (accomplishments, goals, and even challenges), the better the letter will be.**

IV. Recommendation Worksheet (15 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Now you're going to work on a recommendation worksheet — a one-page form that includes everything a writer would need to write your recommendation.
2. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Even if the person has already agreed to write a recommendation, you should deliver this in person. Don't just e-mail it or drop it on his

or her desk. Schedule a time to meet with the person and go over it in case he or she has any questions. Also, it's a good idea to follow up with this person one week before the deadline to see if they need additional information from you and to make sure they've remembered to send the letter.

3. Have students turn to their **Student Handbook page 153, Recommendation Worksheet**.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: This worksheet includes everything the writer needs for your letter of recommendation: details about which college to send the application, the deadline, and details about your achievements, challenges, and goals. To ensure a strong letter, be as specific and detailed as possible.

Give students about 15 minutes to complete the worksheet.

4. Come together as a class. Discuss and answer any questions students have. If time permits, you could have students exchange their worksheets with a partner for feedback.
5. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Now, for the big assignment! For homework, I'd like each of you to follow through in requesting a recommendation. Use your worksheet to make the request, asking the writer to send the letter in time for your first college deadline. Next week, let me know whom you've asked.

V. Wrap Up: Saying Thank You and Keeping in Touch (5 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** In this lesson, we've seen that asking for a letter of recommendation takes a little work. But let's not forget that it takes even more work to write that letter. That's why it's so important to follow up with a thank-you note. Even if you say it in person, which I'm sure you will, a short note is critical and should be written right away.
2. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** You should also follow up to let the person know which college you selected. They'll appreciate knowing that their effort made a difference. And keep in touch with these people. You may need their help in the future, and you also want to honor their investment of time with news of your success.
3. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** That wraps up our Education After High School unit for this year. We'll pick up this subject again next fall. Till then I hope you'll continue your college research. If you have questions, please don't hesitate to ask.

Next week, we'll begin a new unit on Money Matters, when you'll learn about renting an apartment, choosing a car, and more.

SKILLS CHECKLIST

Direct students' attention to **Portfolio page 26, Grade 11 Skills Checklist**. Have students complete the skills checklist questions for Education After High School skills.

EDUCATION AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

I CAN...

Choose courses for senior year based on high school graduation requirements, college recommendations, and suggested courses for a career of interest.	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all	<input type="checkbox"/> somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> very well
Identify college majors I'm interested in.	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all	<input type="checkbox"/> somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> very well
Identify and compare several options for education after high school.	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all	<input type="checkbox"/> somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> very well
Find answers to questions about community college, tech/trade school, apprenticeships, and the military.	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all	<input type="checkbox"/> somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> very well
Compare my academic record with college requirements.	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all	<input type="checkbox"/> somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> very well
Find out more about the FAFSA and college scholarships on my own.	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all	<input type="checkbox"/> somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> very well
Identify steps in the college application process that can be done during the summer between my junior and senior year.	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all	<input type="checkbox"/> somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> very well
Research and compare colleges that interest me.	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all	<input type="checkbox"/> somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> very well
Identify at least one reach, match, and safety school that I'd like to attend.	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all	<input type="checkbox"/> somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> very well
Identify and effectively ask someone to write a recommendation.	<input type="checkbox"/> not at all	<input type="checkbox"/> somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> very well

I'm Right for the Job

A friend has just been offered a part-time job he can't take, and he's been asked to recommend a friend. You'd like the job, and he's asked you to help him describe you to the employer.

List three adjectives you'd use to describe yourself that would convince an employer you should be hired.

Describe a situation in which you showed that you were a trustworthy and responsible person.

One Student, Two Letters

Read the following letters and underline details that might impress you as an admissions officer. Which one do you think would make a better impression on an admissions committee? Why?

Letter A:

To Whom It May Concern:

I'm writing on behalf of Amelia Smith, a senior at Avonlea High School, where I was her sophomore English teacher. Amelia is a bright and hard-working student, as evidenced by her high grades and excellent SAT scores.

Ms. Smith has been a member of the National Honor Society since her junior year. She is active in the Future Teachers of America and the school language club, where she serves as the group's secretary.

She would be an asset to any college program, and I highly recommend her.

Sincerely,

Robert McCoy

Honors English Teacher

One Student, Two Letters (continued)

Letter B:

To Whom It May Concern:

I'm writing on behalf of Amelia Smith, whom I've known since her sophomore year at Avonlea High School. Two years ago, Ms. Smith became a volunteer in my first-grade classroom because of her avid interest in a career as an elementary teacher. There was no official program in place, so Amelia had to set up an interview with the school principal, not an easy task! Once she met with his approval, she arranged to help out two afternoons a week after school. She was steadfast about showing up on time and throwing herself with great enthusiasm into the business of teaching. She created ingenious board games for practicing phonics skills, as well as elegant displays of student work in the hallways.

In addition, Amelia volunteered her time as a summer tutor for her next-door neighbors, second- and third-grade boys struggling with reading. She met with them four mornings a week during July and August following her sophomore year. When we spoke later, she mentioned that she had a lot to learn about teaching.

Amelia is also an active member of her scout troop. For her, this is a much greater commitment than an occasional camp-out or cookie sale. Several years ago, her troop set their sights on a trip to Europe between their junior and senior years, and it was amazing to see this happen last summer. The parents of the troop members are not wealthy; most of the money for the trip was earned baby-sitting, house-cleaning, and through team efforts like flower sales and car washes. Amelia laughingly told me her neighbors used to hide when they saw her coming, knowing that she probably had some product to sell.

Amelia has a fine academic record, but it only tells half the story. Her generosity of spirit, curiosity, and initiative will serve her well in her pursuit of a career as an elementary teacher.

I highly recommend her for your program.

Sincerely,

Margaret Simms

Teacher, Westlea Elementary School

Recommendation Worksheet

Complete the following worksheet for each person you ask to write a letter of recommendation.

Student's Name	
Phone Number	
E-mail	
Date of Request	
College to receive recommendation	
Date due	
Stamped, addressed enveloped attached (check) <input type="checkbox"/>	

Answer the following questions to give the writer more information about yourself. To ensure a strong letter, be as specific and detailed as possible. Use the back if you need more space.

1. What assignment or accomplishment for this class or activity are you most proud of? Why?

2. List three adjectives that describe you. _____

3. What do you think sets you apart from other students? What makes you different?

4. Describe one weakness you have or a challenge you've faced and how you overcame it.

5. What career or major would you like to pursue? Why is this college the best place for you to accomplish your goals? (Or simply explain why you have selected this college.)

6. What other information would help this person write your recommendation?

Adapted from Fulfillment Fund College Pathways Curriculum © 2007 Fulfillment Fund, www.fulfillment.org.