

Letters of Recommendation
By Jennie Withers

Jessica was a student any teacher would love to have in class. She was in my Senior English class, on the basketball team I coached, and involved with many community service organizations. I was only in my second year of teaching, but I knew Jessica was going to be one of my all time favorites. When she asked me to write a letter of recommendation for her, I answered quickly, easily, “Absolutely!”

After Jessica left, I sat at my desk paralyzed with fear. It wasn’t long ago that I was the student requesting letters of recommendation from my teachers. I wanted to write the best letter of recommendation known to any college review board for Jessica. But I didn’t know how. Where should I even begin? I thought Jessica’s future rested on my ability to put words in some sort of order that would make her sound amazing.

After I got over my initial panic, I did what any novice teacher should do. I went to a veteran teacher for help. The first thing this veteran asked me was, “Do you want to do it?” It didn’t occur to me I had a choice. Luckily Jessica was a student I wanted to help.

The advice I received and the tips I’ve developed will help writing letters of recommendations for students a much less daunting task.

First things first, how do you feel about this kid?

Just because they ask, doesn’t mean you have to yes. In fact, you could do more harm than good if your heart’s not in it. Some teachers set up a time in the near future to meet with the student to discuss the possibility. I didn’t necessarily do this, but I did ask

them, “Why me?” If a student couldn’t answer this, then I couldn’t feel good about writing a letter of recommendation.

There were several other rules I had when deciding to write a letter for a student. One, if my gut reaction was no, I can’t do it then I turned the student down. Two, if it would compromise my ethics as a teacher to write the letter then the answer was no. For example, if a student is a discipline problem then I cannot write a glowing (as they need to be) letter of recommendation honestly. Three, the student can’t think of anything for me to write about.

If the answer is no, there is a responsibility for you to explain why you are refusing. I told a number of students I couldn’t do it, and although they were not happy about it, after I gently explained they understood my letter would do more harm than good. It also helps if you can help them brainstorm other, better options. Just remember this is not a time to lecture a student about times they’ve misbehaved, it’s a time to help them move in a different direction. As teachers, we should want them to succeed.

The student must help you

If the answer is yes, the student must do some things for you. My first mistake with Jessica was that I didn’t let her help me. It’s not enough to like a student when it comes to writing letters of recommendation. Nobody is going to think much of a letter that says: *I really like Jessica. She’s a cool kid.* The student needs to provide some things in order to help you get started.

- **Resume** It will tell you what the student’s accomplishments and involvements are. If they don't have one, send them to the internet for resume

templates. There are free resume templates that were designed specifically for teens at www.heygetajob.com, and there many other sources for them as well.

- **Audience** Where is this letter going, what is its purpose? I have written three kinds of letters of recommendation, college entrance, scholarship and job. Although they are the same in a lot of respects, there are some subtle differences.
- **Reasons** Why do they want to attend this college, apply for this scholarship or get this job?
- **Reminisce** Students who want you to write a letter of recommendation asked because they believe they did positive things for you and because of you. Ask them what those things are. This conversation should also include their weaknesses, and if they made significant improvement in some area. Bounce ideas off each other.
- **Time** This not only means a deadline, but the time needed to create a masterpiece. I tell my students I need at least a month. I didn't write letters for the last minute flyby askers. I responded, "I don't have time to write a letter that does you justice."
- **Envelope** I'll use school stationary, but I will not provide an envelope, the address of where it's to be sent, or the stamp.

Getting Started

Written in proper business letter format, the letter should open with the name of the student you're writing for, how you know them (including the extent of your

relationship and the length of time), and what the student is applying to. The most important aspect of the opening paragraph is setting the tone. It's like a thesis statement, it states why you chose to write the letter for the student.

To Whom it May Concern,

I am pleased to write to you on behalf of Jessica Johnson, who is applying for admission to Best University. I have known Jessica for two years. She was a player on my JV basketball team, and is now in my Senior English class. Jessica is a gifted student and athlete, but perhaps more importantly, she is an outstanding citizen.

Prove It

This is the portion of the letter where you have to show, not tell, the readers the student is as great as you think they are. Vague praise or neutrality is avoided through examples and anecdotes that are glowingly positive. These should illustrate one or more of the following:

- Scholarship
- Citizenship
- Leadership
- Community and School Service
- Unusual Circumstance – something about the student's life that makes them extraordinary

Jessica has been an honor student as well as an athlete throughout her high school career. For most students, this is a difficult balance. But for Jessica, it wasn't enough. She became a volunteer at our local nursing home during her sophomore year. This year, after a unit on oral history, she came to my English class to help her begin a program called 'adopt a grandparent' which pairs a student with a resident at the nursing home. Jessica's peers respect her immensely, so it was no surprise that my class enthusiastically helped her. It is because of Jessica that every resident receives a visit from someone on a regular basis.

Wrap It Up

To end, summarize why you are recommending the student. Also, make it clear to what extent you recommend them. There is a difference between *recommend* and *highly recommend*. The committee will probably pick up on this in your letter anyway, so the honest thing to do is state it.

Jessica displays intelligence and leadership abilities that are well beyond her seventeen years. I highly recommend Jessica for entrance into Best University. She is a student that will be an invaluable asset to your institution.

What's Left

Your letter is typed in business format and you are happy with it. Now, let somebody else read it, proof it and then do another draft. It will reflect poorly on the student if there are errors, typos, grammar mistakes, or it's not coming across clearly.

After the final polish, save it and print two copies, one to send and one for you. I printed a copy for me for two reasons. The first not all teachers do. I showed a copy of the letter the student I was writing it for before I sent the other. I let them grade me for a change. I wanted to make sure I was saying what they needed me to. The second, I don't believe in reinventing the wheel. Of course, all of my letters of recommendation were different because students are different, but there was always something I could use from one letter to the other.

The last thing I highly recommend is pat yourself on the back. Being asked to write a letter of recommendation is an honor. It means you are a good teacher, and it means you have a good rapport with students.