

The Truth about Counselor Recommendation Letters

By Megan Shuffleton

It's that time of year again when you polish up your college essay, approach teachers for recommendations and get started on that dreaded Common App. [Applying to college](#) is a long and complicated (but most definitely rewarding!) experience. Applications often require a number of different elements, which can throw you in different directions when you're getting ready to apply.

One key element of the college application is the recommendation letter – namely, the counselor recommendation letter. Some colleges require them, some recommend them and others don't even mention them. Generally, opinions on the counselor recommendation letter vary; luckily, HC is here to explain this curious part of your college application!

What is a counselor recommendation letter?

A counselor recommendation letter is exactly what it sounds like – a letter written by your guidance or college counselor that recommends you as a student. In essence, it's a letter sent to colleges that brags about what a great student you are and why a particular college should accept you.

A recommendation letter should highlight your special skills and personal involvement. It should convey how you go above and beyond and set yourself apart from other students. All this information should be backed up by scholarly statistics, like your GPA and standardized test scores – so stay on top of it!

A recommendation letter could be the factor that sets you apart from another competing student. Each year, colleges and universities receive thousands of applications from somewhat similar students with almost identical application elements. After comparing transcripts, test scores and GPAs, there are only a few more elements that can set you apart, and a recommendation letter is one of them.

Recommendation letters are creative and personal, unlike the numerical value of your SAT score. They can convey your strengths to an admissions counselor in a way that an essay or transcript can't.

While you may have heard of the concept of teacher rec letters – or even recommendations for jobs – counselor recommendation letters are a little different. Counselors have a special insight of where you stand among other students because they've gotten to know many of them. While teacher recommendation letters can be a bit more personalized and positioned in a certain way, counselors can give some educated insight on how you behave as a student in a specific environment among other students.

Why use one?

It's easy enough to tell a college why you're awesome, but let's be honest: You're a little biased. Recommendation letters offer colleges a new perspective on you as a candidate. Letters of recommendation can validate what you've already said on your application and highlight skills that you might not have had the chance to express.

In addition to giving some background on you as a student, a recommendation letter can also give an admissions counselor some information about where you come from. "Many college and

university admission officers use the counselor recommendation to learn more about the school and the community of the student applying for admission,” says Shawn Abbott, assistant vice president and dean of admissions at New York University. “It is helpful to learn about the academic profile of one’s senior class, testing averages, and the socioeconomic background of the students attending and the town or city in which the school resides.”

Not all students come from the same environment with the same resources, so a counselor recommendation letter may give admissions counselors that insight and put your achievements in perspective based on your peers.

Moreover, letters of recommendations can let admissions counselors peek into your life. “They can be really helpful in explaining grades that are anomalies or family situations that may have adversely impacted a student,” says Jacqueline Murphy, director of admission of the undergraduate program at Saint Michael’s College.

While you might not be able to explain a familial situation or environmental factor on your transcript, your counselor has the opportunity to do so in his or her letter. In general, a recommendation letter is another medium that allows your counselor to express your strengths and advocate for you as a candidate.

How can these letters help or hurt your app?

Opinions vary when it comes to how relevant the counselor recommendation letter is. At large schools, it’s likely that students and counselors don’t get much one-on-one time.

Avianne Tan, a senior at New York University, was in this situation. Because Avianne didn’t have much contact with her counselor, she says, “During senior year we were required to give in [‘senior brag sheets’](#) that listed all our accomplishments and other notable resume-esque items just so that they could write letters of recommendation for us even without knowing us, really.”

While those who didn’t know their guidance counselors well probably view their recommendation letters as useless, other collegiettes think differently about the topic. Haleigh Kopinski, a senior at Point Park University, says that her guidance counselor wrote her a letter of recommendation when she was applying for scholarships, which helped immensely. “There were scholarships in my area I wasn’t even eligible to receive due to location, GPA, things like that,” she says. “[My guidance counselor] made me apply for these scholarships I wasn’t eligible for and would send recommendation letters to the boards on these scholarships for them to consider my application. I got all of the scholarships he sent letters into.”

And while it makes sense that students who don’t know their counselors might think that their letters don’t make much of a difference, admissions workers beg to differ. “At UT Austin, we use a holistic review process,” says Laura Lavergne, assistant to the director for special projects and communication at UT Austin’s Office of Admissions. “As a result, meaningful information that comes to us through any submitted items – including recommendations – [has] the potential to make a difference when we are reviewing applications.”

College applications are made up of multiple different elements, but that doesn’t mean that they’re not all important. Everything you submit to colleges can influence their decisions about your application!

How do you receive a good rec letter?

Avianne, who never had much contact with her guidance counselor, points out a good rule to follow when it comes to recommendation letters. “I think it’s a great idea to go out of your way

to intentionally meet and chat with your guidance counselor,” she says. “The more [he or she gets] to know you, the more likely you’ll have a much better [recommendation letter](#) that doesn’t sound generic, and the better your college application will look!”

Colleges take into consideration that some schools are larger than others and some don’t even provide guidance counselors to all students, but even if this is true, you should be making your best effort to get to know one (or let them get to know you)!

Brianna Susnak, a freshman at Indiana University, has a few recommendations when it comes to getting to know your counselor. “Schedule a one-on-one meeting with [him or her and] talk about your post-high school plans, career path, goals, etc.,” she says. “If [your counselor is] familiar with your passions and interests, it will be far easier for [him or her] to write a [standout letter of recommendation](#) for you.”

Haleigh, who was awarded scholarships she wasn’t even eligible for because of a meaningful recommendation letter, thinks that her letter was so successful because she knew her counselor well. “In high school [my counselor] really helped me out a lot, and not only with class and school,” she says.

Guidance counselors aren’t only there for academic purposes, but also for mental and emotional support. “I felt that he really knew me because he actually took the time to do so,” Haleigh says.

Consider approaching your counselor for more than just academic purposes – he or she is there to help you out with a number of issues, not just college applications!

Avianne recommends starting up the relationship as early as possible. “Introduce yourself as early as freshman year!” she says. Meeting your counselor early will set up a solid foundation for developing a relationship all throughout high school. Not only will building the relationship help you when it comes to the letter of recommendation, but your counselor might even be able to help you [decide on schools](#) and develop your college essay if he or she knows you well enough. Not to mention your counselor will be able to track your growth throughout your high school career and be able to highlight it on a letter of recommendation. Getting to know your counselor early will surely reap some benefits come application time!

“Counselor and teacher letters of recommendation can be very helpful in assessing a student’s readiness for college-level work if they are clear and honest in their evaluations,” Murphy says. Murphy also mentions that boilerplate letters that could’ve been written about anyone or letters that bear little resemblance to the rest of the student’s application are not helpful to the process. “At times one wonders if the writer really knows anything about the student when a glowing recommendation is paired with a mediocre transcript,” she says.

So make sure to get to know your guidance counselor personally and work with him or her closely on your application. This way, your counselor will be qualified to write about your strengths, and the letter will line up with the rest of your application.

Counselor recommendation letters are just one portion of the college application process, but it’s important not to overlook them. Anything in your application can make or break your college acceptances, including what your guidance counselor has to say about you! Do your best to get to know your counselor in order to receive the best advice as well as a personal and impressive recommendation letter – you’ll get one step closer to the college of your dreams!

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