

A Dozen Things About Letters of Reference

You will probably need a letter of reference sometime during your high school career. Perhaps it will be when you have the opportunity to attend a special camp, to travel, to apply for a scholarship, or to enroll in a college. Here are a few things that you need to know about these important letters.

Be Polite:

1. A letter of reference is a gift, an important gift that opens doors for you (or closes doors to you). You are not entitled to a letter of reference-if someone takes the time to write one for you they have given you an endowment, an endorsement, they are putting their name next to yours.
2. Go personally to the teacher and ask politely for the letter of reference. You shouldn't grovel (no bowing or kneeling) or offer money (no bribes, please). Don't send a friend; don't have your parents call or write. You are the person who needs the letter; you are the only person who should ask for a reference letter. If your relationship with the teacher prevents you from asking for a letter of reference, then you should ask a different teacher.

Be Timely:

3. A good letter of reference requires time, thought, and a thesaurus. (How many ways can you say excellent and how do you spell mal-adjusted?) Allow **at least two weeks** for a teacher to write your letter if you truly want a good letter of reference!
("Poor planning and procrastination on YOUR part does NOT constitute an emergency on the teacher's part.")
4. Just like you know how to **time** a request of your parents ("May I go to the beach during spring break?") to guarantee that they are in a good mood, not too busy to listen, etc., be sure to watch your timing when asking your teacher for a reference letter. During class is definitely not a good time; after class while three other people stand in line to ask about school work is also questionable. Find a quiet moment so that you can explain to the teacher exactly what you need.

Be a Good Sport:

5. The teacher may have to decline your request and the reason may have nothing to do with you. Say "thank you" anyway and try to smile when you say it.
6. Have a backup plan. Teachers get sick, forget, have accidents, etc. and may not be able to fulfill your request. To ensure another reference will have adequate time to complete your recommendation, **a week prior to your set date**, touch base with your teacher to make sure your reference will be able to complete your request.

Which brings us to the next point:

Be In The Know:

7. Not all letters of reference are created equal. Before you go to the teacher, know the name of the organization and to whom the letter should be addressed. Know the characteristics the organization is looking for: personal character traits, academic achievement, athletic awards, citizenship, community involvement. If it is too much trouble for you to find the answers to these questions, the scholarship/opportunity should go to someone else.

8. Provide the teacher with many tools.
 - A. Write your name on the application in the appropriate space in black ink with your best handwriting. (Neatness counts!) He/She probably has several other applications/letters to write. You don't want yours to get lost in the shuffle of papers.
 - B. Make a Brag Sheet of your accomplishments, achievements, and things you have been involved in (Don't forget summer jobs, church activities, & volunteer experiences). Make a copy for each teacher that you ask to write a letter. Update it every year.
 - C. Find out if there is an online version of the letter/application that the teacher might prefer to complete.

Be Aware of the Rules:

9. A letter of reference is usually placed into a sealed envelope with the teachers' signature on the seal. This is a guarantee to the organization that the letter is genuine and the information inside is factual.
Do not open the letter.
10. If the teacher chooses to share with you what was written about you that is okay, but don't ask.
11. Some organizations require that the letter be sent straight to them from the teacher by US mail; others want all the information sent as a packet in a single large envelope. Find out so that you can inform the teacher who is writing your letter.

Be Appreciative

12. When the teacher gives you the letter or tells you that it has been mailed/delivered, be sure that you tell them "Thank You". It is also a great idea to follow up with a handwritten note (no fancy stationary needed-just plain ole' notebook paper will do!). Doing this is sure to help you to get another great reference letter when the next opportunity comes along!