

College Preparation: Will You Write a Letter of Recommendation for Me, Please?

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Time Frame 60-120 session(s)

Essential Question(s)

- Why might you need a letter of recommendation?
- Who might write a letter of recommendation?

Summary

This lesson is to be used after students have reached the point in an application process that calls for a letter of recommendation. However, it can also be used to generate a generic recommendation letter that can later be revised for a specific purpose.

Learning Goals

- Students will identify three people from whom they might request a written letter of recommendation for college admissions and scholarship applications.
- Students will be able to identify what is necessary for an individual to write an exemplary letter of recommendation that meets the requirements of college admission and scholarship applications.

Attachments

- Thought Bubbles.pdf
- Who Will Write Your Teacher Recommendation.pdf

Materials

- Pencils/pens/markers
- Blank paper for activities (as needed)
- Post-it notes or a ¼ sheet of paper
- Thought bubbles
- Who Will Write Your Teacher Recommendation? (handout)

Engage

Instruct students that they will have 2 minutes to write or list as many things in the following categories:

- My Academic Strengths
- My Personal Strengths
- My Accomplishments

There will be no talking after time has started.

Start time and allow students to write about their strengths and accomplishments for the duration of the time. Call time after 2 minutes, and ask students to stop writing. Allow students to share out one strength or accomplishment that they had written down. Some students may not want to share, but for those that do, remind them to keep it to only one item from their list. This will keep it from becoming a competition. This strategy will allow students to focus on positive attributes which will later be important during discussions.

Explore

Using the Commit and Toss strategy, pose the question “What is a letter of recommendation, and why might you need one written?”

Note

The Commit and Toss strategy is effective in helping students brainstorm a list of items that might require you to provide a letter of recommendation. It will also begin the conversation about a letter of recommendation.

Students will use a ¼ sheet of paper and respond in writing to the question. Then, they will crumple their responses and, on the count of three, toss them across the room for someone new to pick up. Each student then collects a crumpled paper and tosses that paper ball again on the teacher's count of three. This helps keep responses anonymous. (This activity can also be completed by having students toss their crumpled papers into a box. Then, after all are in the box, instruct each student collect one each.) Students must first check the crumpled paper they picked up to make sure it is not their own paper. If it is, have that student trade papers with another student. Students will read aloud the response on the paper that was collected.

The teacher will use the responses to create a master list on the board or on chart paper, thus creating a generated list of when you might need a recommendation letter written. Have students add to this list if other responses come to mind while others are sharing.

Possible Responses

Applying for a job, scholarship, internship, social club, etc.

After students have shared their ideas, make sure to clear up any misunderstanding of when you would or would not need a recommendation letter. For example, you would not need a letter of recommendation to take a class in college, but when applying for college, you might be required to have one or more letters of recommendation submitted with your application.

Explain

After the list has been compiled, have students get into proximity groups of three or four and discuss the following question: “Why is a good recommendation crucial in these scenarios?” Allow 3-5 minutes for students to discuss. After time has ended, have some groups share out what was discussed.

Possible Responses

“A good recommendation is crucial because it provides important information about who you are and what qualities you hold that will help you be a productive team member or student.” “It may be the reason you get the job.” “These letters could help you stand out above the other applicants.” "The recommendation is crucial because it paints a picture of how you might or might not fit in the position for which you are applying. It gives the evaluator a better image or idea of you."

Next, have students return to their individual seats. Students are going to use the attached **Thought Bubble** page to brainstorm individuals that they would feel comfortable asking to write a letter of recommendation for them.

Make it clear that at least one person must be a specific teacher and that they may not use family members.

Teacher's Note

This may be a difficult task for some students. Give them time to think, but if they’re stuck, offer suggestions from the "Possible Response" section below. This will hopefully help them to come up with some ideas of people in their life who could write a recommendation.

After students have time to think and write, students need to each find an elbow partner. Have partners discuss their lists with each other. During this time, students may add to or eliminate people from their list. After a few moments, allow students to share with the whole group. After students have each had a turn, you may want to give a few more ideas from the Possible Responses below.

Possible Responses

Clergy (priest, pastors, reverend), doctors, scout leaders, business owners/managers, teachers, coaches, instructors of a special course (CPR, dance, martial arts, etc.), guidance counselors, principals, club advisers, supervisors, co-workers, youth group leaders, and family friends.

Then, have students highlight or circle three individuals from their list that they believe would write the best letter of recommendation. Again, one of these individuals must be a teacher. Remind them to choose people who know their strengths and abilities and who will hopefully say positive things about them. As they choose three, remind them to think about and refer to the list they first created on their strengths and accomplishments.

Extend

Hand out the attachment **Who Will Write Your Teacher Recommendation?** to students. Either have students take turns reading the bullet points out loud or have them read silently on their own.

Once read, students may begin to fill out the second and third pages of the handout.

Teacher's Note

Since students don't have control over what an individual might write, number five could communicate accomplishments or experiences instead of "things I hope you discuss in this letter."

Evaluate

To wrap up and review the lesson, instruct students to independently complete a 3-2-1 on a new sheet of paper.

Students will write:

- 3 things that need to be included in a letter of recommendation
- 2 steps that need to be taken before asking someone to write a letter of recommendation
- 1 question or concern they may still have before beginning this process

If time allows, students may read their questions to the class. This would provide an opportunity for peers or for the teacher to clear up any misunderstandings or misconceptions about letters of recommendation.

Follow-up Activities

Follow up with students as the time comes for students to begin to apply for college. They have a lot to remember, and it might be overwhelming to them; asking teachers or others to write letters of recommendation might slip through the cracks. Check with your students periodically, gently reminding them to:

- Ask adults to write a letter of recommendation no later than a month before the letter is due. If they say "no," move on to another adult.
- Provide all required forms, stamped envelope, and information about yourself as soon as possible.
- Follow up with adults who are writing your letters a few weeks before it is due to make sure they know the due date is approaching.
- Write "Thank You" notes to all of the adults who took the time to write and submit your recommendation letters.

Research Rationale

Students who attend college after graduation and complete a four-year degree enjoy greater job satisfaction and better quality of life post-graduation, and college graduates have significantly better opportunities for upward career mobility and earning a living wage (Okerson, 2016). College readiness is a process, not a program. The reasons students do not matriculate to college are many and varied (King, 2012). To mitigate the college-going gap, high school students need both support and assistance in preparing for and attending college (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013; King, 2012; Sherwin, 2012). College admission processes are complex. Many students have no idea where to begin. King (2012) and Sherwin (2012) both notice students' need for appropriate steps and guidance to make sense of college entrance. Applying for financial aid and scholarships, navigating college admission requirement, participating in ACT and SAT workshops, writing the college admission essay , and securing needed recommendations are all college processes that often hamper students in securing admission. Alvarado and An (2015), Belasco (2012), and King (2012) all found that minority students, first-generation college applicants, and students whose families have low socioeconomic status (SES) rely more heavily on their schools for guidance. Therefore by providing students an intentional opportunity to understand the necessity of college recommendation letters and how to write them, will help create a college-going culture within the school and establish clear expectations that all students have the ability and opportunity to attend college.

Resources

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