



Writing Strong Counselor Recommendation Letters

A counselor recommendation should **add something the rest of the application cannot provide**. Help the reader understand the student within the context of your school and share what you have learned from actually knowing them.

Add, Don't Repeat

Admission officers already have the transcript, activities, honors, and application. Don't turn the résumé into paragraph and don't include things about which you have no knowledge beyond the résumé.

Instead of: Emma is president of Student Council, captain of the soccer team, and a member of NHS.

Add something they don't know: When younger Student Council members are hesitant to speak during meetings, Emma is often the person who pulls them into the conversation and asks what they think.

Write What You Know

Some of the best material comes from things you have personally seen or experienced: a conversation in your office, a course-registration decision, how a student handled disappointment, an interaction with a classmate, or a moment when you noticed growth. Small moments can reveal more than big accomplishments.

Instead of: Jack is resilient and mature.

Try: When Jack learned he had not been selected for a leadership position he badly wanted, he was clearly disappointed. Before leaving my office, he asked whether there was another way he could help with the program.

Anecdotes Beat Adjectives

Don't just call a student *kind*, *hardworking*, *mature*, or *motivated*. Give the reader evidence.

Instead of "kind": During a college presentation, I noticed a new student standing alone. Before I could introduce him to anyone, Will moved his backpack off the chair beside him and waved the student over.

Instead of "has grown": As a ninth grader, Johnny rarely spoke during our meetings without looking toward her mother. By junior spring, she arrived with her own questions, disagreed with one of my college suggestions, and explained why another belonged on her list.



Provide Context

Counselors can help admission officers understand what a student's record means at your school.

Instead of: Claire is taking five AP courses senior year.

Try: With five AP courses senior year, Claire has chosen the most demanding schedule available at our school.

Useful context might include course availability, scheduling limitations, academic trajectory, responsibilities outside school, limited opportunities, or why an accomplishment is particularly meaningful in your community.

Your school profile gives the broad context. Your letter explains how it applies to this student.

Tell the Academic Story, Not the Transcript

The reader can see the student's courses and grades. Explain what they don't show.

You could mention whether the student:

- consistently chose challenge
- showed meaningful academic growth
- responded particularly well to difficulty
- made a course choice that reveals something about them
- has something on the transcript that needs context

Instead of: Henry has taken a rigorous curriculum.

Try: During senior course registration, I suggested Henry might give himself some breathing room. He said, "I'd regret not taking Physics more than I'd regret having too much homework." He enrolled in Physics.

Keep the Praise Credible, Honest, and Realistic

Not every student needs to be “*one of the finest students I have encountered in my career.*”

Specific, measured praise is more useful than hyperbole. Write as one educator giving another educator an informed assessment.



Choose a Format

Traditional narrative: Works well when you know the student well and have a story or throughline.

A simple structure:

Opening: Overall impression

Academic: What doesn't the transcript show?

Personal: Specific observation or anecdote

Closing: What will this student bring to college?

Paragraph + bullets: A good option for large caseloads or when you have several distinct observations.

Maya is an independent, thoughtful student who consistently looks for ways to challenge herself.

- **Intellectual curiosity:** During senior course registration...
- **Contribution:** One moment that captures Maya particularly well...
- **Growth:** When I first met Maya...

I recommend Maya enthusiastically and expect her to bring that same curiosity and thoughtfulness to her college community.

The format matters less than whether the letter provides useful, specific information.

Quick Check

- Did I add something that isn't already in the application?
- Did I write about things I actually know?
- Did I include at least one specific example?
- Did I provide context where it matters?
- Did I avoid rewriting the résumé or transcript?
- If I removed the student's name, would I know whose letter this is?
- Is my level of recommendation clear?