

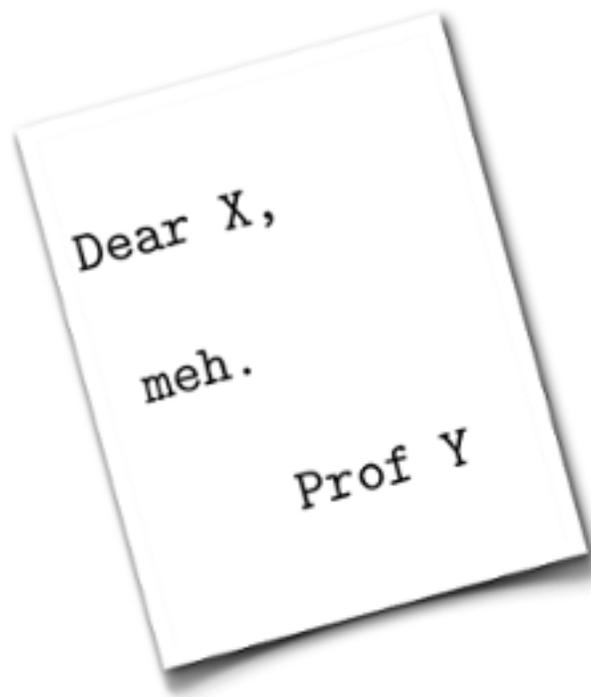
When Should You Ask for a Letter of Recommendation?

The first step in requesting a letter of recommendation involves **timing**. Even for seasoned teachers and counselors, each individual letter takes time and thought to do well. I recommend asking your recommenders **at least a month before your application deadlines**. In some cases, even earlier is better.

Some teachers put a cap on how many requests they take. If they have a first come, first served policy, then you should ask even earlier than a month before your deadlines so you don't miss out. A lot of teachers get **inundated by the end of the semester**, when they might be already busy getting exams scored and grades completed, not to mention spending time with friends and family over winter vacation. Because of this, it's a good idea to ask your recommenders early in the semester, like in September.

Junior year teachers are often a good choice, because they had you recently and for a full year (whereas your senior year teachers might not know you that well yet). It can also be a good idea to ask your junior year teachers **at the end of junior year**, when you're fresh in their mind from being a student in their class all year (also a good idea if you have early decision deadlines). It gives them an entire summer to work on your letter. Just make sure to politely remind them a few weeks before your deadlines, if they haven't submitted your rec letter by then.

Once you've figured out who you're asking and when, how can you frame your request in a positive way? First, I'll talk about **how to ask a teacher and then how to ask your counselor**, as the process and your relationships with these people is probably a little different.



Make your request in person, so you don't end up with a letter like this.

How to Ask for a Letter of Recommendation from a Teacher

How are you going to approach your request? What should you say? What information do you need to give your teacher? As long as you've prepared yourself in these three aspects, you're all set to make your request. Let's break each down one at a time.

How to Make Your Request

In person. I highly recommend asking for your recommendation face to face. Depending on your teacher's schedule and school culture, it may be appropriate to email your teacher to set up an appointment or meeting. Asking for a letter of recommendation solely over email could be interpreted as impersonal, distant, and less mature, an impression you don't want to make in the mind of a recommender.

I also wouldn't recommend asking during class time, but instead **find time during a free period, after school, or whenever the teacher has free time to meet.** The request may be short, but you still want to create space in case your teacher wants to further discuss your plans.

What to Say

While it can feel scary and vulnerable to ask a teacher for this favor, remember that teachers, especially ones that have juniors and seniors, **expect this.** In fact, it's part of their job description. Likely all of these teachers write letters of recommendation for students every year and want to help you succeed and continue on in your education. It may also help you to remember that a lot of teachers know what it's like to be on the other side of this process, as they usually undergo observations and evaluations every year.

The best way to calm your nerves and ensure the conversation goes smoothly is to **prepare what you'll say.** I recommend phrasing your request simply and directly, without a lot of "ums," "likes," or "I forgot what I was about to say, so let's take a raincheck - how about next Thursday?" Something like this could work:

"I really enjoyed your class. I've learned a lot from you and feel like you've gotten to know me well. I'm apply to College X for next year and would be really flattered if you could write me a strong letter of recommendation for my application(s)."

Note the phrasing of a *strong* recommendation. You want to make sure your teacher can write you a **strong and compelling letter, not a generic one.** If, worst case scenario, your teacher declines or seems hesitant, simply thank them and ask somebody else. You wouldn't want a weak letter that wouldn't help, or could even hurt, your application. You want to find a recommender who will agree to write a letter for you without reservation.

If you've asked someone who knows you well and agrees to provide you with a letter of rec, then it's a good idea to share some further information with him/her. In a lot of schools, they call this a "brag sheet."

The "brag sheet" isn't really about bragging, not even backdoor brags.

Information to Give Your Teacher(s)

First off, your teachers need to know the **logistics**. When are your college deadlines? How do they submit the letter of rec? In most cases, your early decision deadlines will be in October and your regular decision deadlines will be in early January. Typically, writers **upload their recommendations** through the [Common Application](#) or, if your school uses it, through Naviance.

Beyond the requirements, I strongly advise providing your teacher with your brag sheet, or your reflections on who you are and what you value. Usually the guidance office distributes these to juniors and seniors, inviting students and parents to comment on it. The more **detailed and thoughtful** you are about your values, goals, and accomplishments, the more useful your brag sheet will be to the writer. While you might not be used to or all that comfortable writing about yourself, you should take the time to reflect deeply about what you care about and what experiences have been especially meaningful in your life.

This will help your teacher add further dimension to your recommendation, as well as help differentiate you from other students they're writing about. In a perfect world your recommenders are bursting with fun and poignant anecdotes to share about you in their class, but in reality most teachers could use your help to **complement what they plan to say**.

I would recommend **going into your request ready with your completed brag sheet**. If the teacher agrees, then you can pass it over. Be ready to have a discussion on it if the teacher wants to hear your thoughts.

In addition to giving revealing insights about your character and interaction with other students, your teachers are the best authorities on your academic performance and potential. Your counselor, on the other hand, can speak more to your role in the school community and **growth over your years in high school**. Because your relationship with your counselor is different from that with your teachers, you may approach your recommendation request differently.