

# Writing the Counselor Letter of Recommendation

DeVone Eurales – Knox College

# What is the Purpose of the Recommendation Letter?

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- Advocate for the student
- Highlight a student's strengths and limitations
- Provide insight into a student's character and potential to thrive at the school
- Show context in which to evaluate student's preparation for college
- "Flesh out" the student and bring him to life for the reader
- Accomplish all of this while being "brief"

# How Does It Differ from the Teacher Recommendation?

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- Narrow Focus: Classroom
- How the student enhances the learning process
- How the student compares to others in the classroom
- Leadership in the classroom
- Special project or activity
- How would the class be different w/o the student?

# How does it Differ from the Teacher Recommendation?

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- Broad Focus: Over several years in a global context
- Character
- Academic strengths and challenges
- Personal strengths and challenges
- Passions or interests
- Leadership
- Obstacles or risks taken
- Areas of pride

# Preparing to Write

## Gather Information

- Interview student and get their “story”
- Refer to Counselor Recommendation forms
- Teacher comments from the “non-recommending” teacher
- Parents “brag sheet”



# Tell the Student's Story

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# Tell the Student's Story



# Tell the Student's Story: A Great "Opener"

- A catchy opening to grab the reader's interest and "set the stage" for comments to come.

James: The Student who seems to juggle everything!

"Step right on up, Ladies and Gentlemen, in the center ring we have the one, the only, Juggling James- performing for your entertainment. Top hat extended, I invite you to sit back and take in the enormity of the spheres of involvement James keeps balanced in the air – and be amazed!"

# Tell The Student's Story



## “The Determined Student ”

“Just do it! That is what Mary’s all about. She makes up her mind, regardless of the difficulties or risks, and simply gets the job done.”

## “Personal Passion”

“As the baseball season draws to a close, “cross-town fever” spreads. In the unlikely event that the Sox and Cubs would meet in the series, I can imagine no other event that would distract Andrew’s academic focus, save the Sox in the Series.

# Examples, not Adjectives, Complete the Picture



- Move from General to Specific
- Use topic sentences to organize what you want to highlight
- Highlight a few points with in-depth coverage
- Do not reiterate information already found in transcript or application

# “The Good Stuff”

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- Use personal examples (not just adjectives) to highlight the student’s qualities.

(Jane: talented music student).

“I have spoken of Jane’s independence and self-assuredness, but would like to share one more insight. Since her early teens, Jane has travelled alone to most of her competitions – both national and international. Often making her own travel arrangements, planning her transportation to and from airports, and negotiating the exchange of foreign currency.”

# In Conclusion: Summing it all Up

- Refer back to the ideas in your introduction
- State any concerns in a positive manner
- Reinforce what the student can bring to the campus

“Mary’s abilities, attitudes and intellect leave me no doubt that she will make a significant contribution to the campus community.”



# How Does The College Use the Information It Receives?

ALL INFORMATION IN A STUDENT'S APPLICATION IS REVIEWED AND UTILIZED

- Admissions Decisions
- Review of Provisional Students
- Scholarship Offers
- Special Programs or Opportunities



# What Do We Hope To See?

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- Student's abilities  
(Personal and Academic)
- Work style
- Potential
- Character
- How they handle  
difficulties or obstacles
- Personal passions



# Recommendations are Rated

- **Excellent Rating**
- Recommendations and supporting evidence show that people are deeply impressed with student's personal qualities
- Statements like “best student ever” appear in recommendations



# Recommendations Ratings

- **Good Rating**
- Tangible evidence that student has made a definite impact on others
- Slightly less spectacular than the “once in a lifetime” or “best student ever” of a P1 level student



**(BUT NOT GREAT!)**

# Recommendation Ratings

- **Average Rating**
- Student's letters still speak highly, but are more "standard fare"
- Recommendation letter could have been written for many students
- Counselor support is "average"



# What Can a Counselor Do?

- Tell a story about the student. Show, don't just tell.
- Provisional students need more explanation to help us understand who they are.
- Common app rating scales: WE DO READ THEM!
- Context: Alum? Years of experience? Need to talk or email?
- Be as honest as you can!



# What Are the “Don’ts”?

- ❑ Brag about yourself!
- ❑ Assume we know the student or your high school well.
- ❑ Repeat your school profile.
- ❑ Have another school’s name on the recommendation!



# HOT TOPICS!

- Are there times when I should not write a recommendation?
- What if a student is “blah” and bland?
- What can I divulge in a letter of recommendation?
- What if the student does not “waive his rights” to view my letter?
- How do I speak about a student’s weaknesses without hurting his chances for admission?
- Other questions?



## Letter of Recommendation for **Sporticus Rex**:

True scholar, talented athlete, and active leader are all titles that can be given to Sporticus. I have been Sporty's counselor since his freshman year and since that time he has impressed me with his go-getting attitude and spirit. He is a self-directed and assertive young man that is willing to ask for help and help others.

Sporty's transcript clearly shows that he has taken a very rigorous curriculum at Ivy Prep. He has excelled at 3 AP classes already and is currently enrolled in 4 more AP classes. His 4.86 GPA and top 4% class rank at our extremely competitive prep school show that Sporty is a true scholar and a dedicated student. It takes a very talented student and tons of hard work to make it in the top 10% of the Ivy senior class, let alone the top 4%. Sporty's academic talents led him to also earn recognition in Spanish Honors Society, Mu Alpha Theta, Academic Scholar Award, and honor roll every semester.

Sporty is as dedicated to his sports as he is to his academics. Running is a huge part of Sporty's life. He has been a dedicated and driven member of the cross country and track teams at Ivy Prep. His athletic talent has led him to achieving All State status and he has broken a couple of records at Ivy. Running has developed and strengthened Sporty's organizational skills, time management ability, work ethic, and leadership skills.

It is not hard to notice that Sporty is an active leader. He has actively led by example and with his strong work ethic throughout his high school courses and sports. In his classes he leads by helping others and truly enjoying learning with his peers and teachers. He connects with his teachers and continually desires to learn more. Sporty is a dedicated leader in his sports. His energy, positive attitude, and team spirit continually lead the team and motivate them to work harder. Sporty's love of running and enthusiasm for the sport led him to be elected the cross country team captain. Even with sports and academics consuming Sporty's life he still has time to lead others by helping younger children at his church, participating in a youth organization, and being a top caddy at Posh Country Club.

I enthusiastically recommend Sporticus Rex for admission. He has proven to be an exemplary scholar, athlete, and leader. He is an intelligent, talented, athletic, diligent, and charismatic young man. I have always witnessed him to be passionate and dedicated to everything that he does. He will be successful in his college, career, and in life.

Sincerely,

*Jonny Doe*  
Senior Counselor

# What worked? Evaluate:

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- Introduction: Strong? Attention-getter?
- Counselor/student relationship clear?
- Academic information: enhance or repeat?
- Descriptors of student: Helpful?
- Follow through with examples?
- Final paragraph: helpful?
- Did letter express his unique characteristics?
- Did letter tell us a good story?