

Writing the College Recommendation:

As teachers, the most important
persuasive essay
we will ever write!



What Our Letters Should Demonstrate About Our Students:

- Superior academic achievement.
- Extracurricular activity involvement.
- Outstanding personal qualities.
- Participation in and dedication to a **particular field.**
- Our confidence in their abilities.
- **Specific examples of all of the above – in our classrooms, in the hallways, on our playing fields, and in our club activities.**

The Challenge:

- What about the average student who is **difficult to write about**?
- What about the incredible student who is so **easy to write about** that you don't know which details to choose?
- What about the student you have **next to nothing** to write about?
- What about handling the **tons of letters** you have been asked to write?

The Formula: Get A Template Going!

- **Opening:** General- sets the stage, describes your connection to student, outlines what you value in a student, describes the expectations of your course
- **One Paragraph** highlighting the student's specific achievement in your class/on the field, etc.
- **One Paragraph** highlighting student's specific personal qualities
- **One Paragraph** highlighting the student's specific contribution to the school, community, etc.- if you have the information.
- **Closing:** General- gives one last pitch for the student, confidence in student's ability to meet college's expectations....

The Template Opening

As a teacher of English, I am charged with the responsibility of fostering an environment in which literature and writing is celebrated, valued, and shared. Once this environment is created, my students can thrive and grow. I have had the wonderful opportunity to work with Suzanne Mercer in my English 11R class last year; as a result, I have witnessed Suzanne's continued success as an outstanding English student who celebrates, values, and shares her love of learning with others. It is my distinct pleasure to elaborate on just some of my experience with this exceptional young woman. 4

The Personalized Opener

When a student as special as **Mary** comes along, a teacher must take pause and reflect upon the joys of teaching. There is a quote I use to describe Mary- one I have shared with her parents, one I have often shared with her: “Still waters run deep.” Mary, in her humble, confident manner, speaks loudly and boldly, without raising her voice one octave. Mary, reflective and certain, possesses a deep-rooted belief in what matters most. She stands strong in an ever-changing world, clear of vision, steady on her path. Should she decide to use her talents to become a doctor, the world will certainly know of her presence.

The Out of the Box Opener

One day last spring, the most academically gifted student in my AP English class walked into the classroom and presented me with a gift: it was a copy of her published novel. Suffice it to say, I was awestruck and spent the weekend absorbed in the novel. It was absolutely terrific: a well-written, suspenseful adventure in the style of *The Hunger Games*. I couldn't help but think how proud S.E. Hinton's English teacher must have been! As cliché as this sounds, once in a lifetime (maybe twice), an English teacher has a student like Debbie Sullivan in her classroom.

**PARAGRAPH 1:
HIGHLIGHT SPECIFIC
CLASSROOM
ACHIEVEMENT**

Sample of Placing Superior Student Work in Context

- Deborah's high scores in biology have consistently placed her in the top 5 percent of the class. In addition, her science-fair project in marine biology demonstrated a high level of conceptual understanding of a number of complex varieties of plant and animal life. All of this fits well with Deborah's plan to earn an undergraduate degree, then a master's and Ph.D., so that she can teach college-level biology while performing research on sea urchins.

From College Board 8

Sample of Specifically Showcasing Exceptional Work

Sara's ability to devise original thesis statements and prove them thoroughly and expertly sets her apart from her peers. In fact, her paper on Christian symbolism in *The Old Man and the Sea* was so forceful, so analytical, and so beyond the work of her peers that I had to stop grading and regroup in an effort to maintain equity. Her thoughts are that good; she is that good.

ONE EXTENDED EXAMPLE CAN DO THE TRICK!

Sheila has a natural sense of language, and I can distinctly recall her skilled use of descriptive language, sentence structure, and elevated vocabulary in one particular entertaining narrative piece about her family's trip to Ireland one summer. When I brought up her work on the Promethean Board, read it aloud, and highlighted her writing techniques, the class was exposed to exemplary writing that was within their reach. In an exercise immediately following, students were asked to revise a small portion of their own work, employing the techniques Sheila had so effectively mastered. Although I had asked her permission to use her work with the class, I could tell that she was unaccustomed to such attention. However, when her classmates laughed at all the right parts, were moved at all the right parts, and were satisfied with the mature, reflective closing, I knew she understood the power and appeal of good writing- **her** good writing. Sheila's rich inner voice radiated outward in her thoughtful contributions throughout the year.

**PARAGRAPH 2:
HIGHLIGHT
SPECIFIC PERSONAL
QUALITIES**

Paint a Picture of Personal Traits:

Ben's dedicated work ethic could be observed as he worked individually, as well as in cooperative groups. During a cross-curricular project last year in which the students had to research and analyze a segment of America in the 1920s, Ben's intelligence and leadership qualities flourished. I had purposely put Ben in a group of lethargic students, knowing that if anyone could motivate them, it would be him. He has a charismatic presence, and his dedicated work ethic turned out to be contagious. The project was a success.

Showcase Personal Qualities:

Charismatic and good-natured, Joe approached all classroom endeavors with spirit and enthusiasm. When he read the part of Stanley in *Streetcar Named Desire*, he did so with great passion, his voice resonating in the classroom, shaking the walls as he bellowed, “Stellllaaaahhhh!” to the delight of the class. He is as kind as he is outgoing. For example, when an ELL student entered our class mid-year one Tuesday afternoon, without prompting, Joe got up, walked over to her, held out his hand, and introduced himself. And, when we held our Roaring 20s Celebration, Joe was my right-hand man: folding invitations, setting up displays, hanging murals, and helping the musicians set up their playing area. On the day of the celebration, dressed in full twenties attire, he embraced the excitement of the event. I will always remember his contagious warmth each day he came into my classroom and greeted us with a genuine smile; in turn, we smiled back, as if we had any choice!

**CONTRIBUTIONS TO
OUR SCHOOL OR
ISLAND TREES
COMMUNITY**

Some Kids Do Great Things Outside of School:

- Having taught his younger brother John last year as well, I am also aware of the 'parenting' role that Paul plays in his home and the care and love that he shows his younger brother. I'm sure my colleagues would agree that Paul is really quite special. He is *one of the good guys*; a student who shows maturity more representative of an adult than of a teenager as he balances the responsibilities of both school and home.

Contributions to School

Jane is an active member of our school community, acting as a mentor and coach to our underclassmen, though she holds no formal title. As a member of our high school book club, Jane is our chief recruiter, reaching out to ninth grade readers and encouraging them to participate in our group. During our book talks, she subtly engages our ninth graders and makes them feel comfortable. Her natural gift of leadership is also evidenced in her role as tutor. On countless afternoons in the library, I have witnessed her patience and attention to detail. A gifted listener, Jane sets her students at ease. If her involvement here at Island Trees is an indicator of what she could contribute to your school, then Jane would clearly be a tremendous asset.

What to Leave Out

- A list of student's involvements in clubs, sports, etc. – Students submit an activity sheet with their applications.
- Generic descriptors with no specifics about the student's academic presence or personal qualities: hands in assignments, is attentive, respectful, nice, polite...
- “Kiss of Death” Descriptors: quiet, underachiever, shy, lacks confidence, late-bloomer, slow-starter...

THE CLOSER

Template Closing

- Ever positive, quick with a bright hello and genuine smile, Graham is a hands-down winner, a true scholar and a reflective human being. As he prepares for his future, I am honored to be a part of the process, and I know that when he returns to Island Trees High School to visit, he will share with me with stories of his academic success. On all counts, Graham is deserving of any and every chance to fulfill his aspirations to become a writer, as he has a natural gift for words, for people, and for engaging his audience.

Resources

- Sample Letters and helpful documents will be posted in our Staff Resources.
- Duty coverage will be provided for teachers requiring time to write recommendations.
- **OUR INCREDIBLE GUIDANCE DEPARTMENT!**
- Our College Room for a quiet work space and access to student information.

THANK YOU!