

English Transcript for *Letters of Recommendation*

Schools want to hear from you, so they require an essay. But they also want to hear from what other people have to say about you, so they require letters of recommendation. Letters of recommendation let a university hear from the trusted adults in your life about who you are and what makes you so great. Your recommenders have the gift of age and experience on their side. So, they can talk about you from a perspective from which, you cannot talk about yourself. Much like your essay, an admission officer will use a letter of recommendation to learn about who you are. In order to learn about who you are your letters need to be detailed. A teacher listing the grades that you earned in his or her class is not detailed. A counselor, saying that you are one of the most brilliant students he or she has ever worked with, is not detailed. A recommender, writing that they know you will be successful in college is not detailed. To be detailed, your recommenders need to explain these ideas in depth. It's not about the grade. High or low. It's about how you distinguished yourself as a student. Did you ask great questions or lead class discussions? Did you tutor other students or did you, yourself, seek out tutoring? Which is a good thing. It's not about being the most brilliant. It's about why you are the most brilliant. What is it that has distinguished you, in that teacher's mind. Was it how quickly you understood the information, or maybe how hard you worked to understand the information. Was it your creativity or maybe your logic? Was it depth or breadth or maybe both? It's not about knowing you'll be successful, it's about why you will be successful. Exactly what is it that the writer has seen that makes them so sure. You will be a success. Like your essay, recommendations should tell stories. Stories bring your recommender's claims to life. Blank is the most brilliant student I have ever taught. A story that reflects her brilliance is. It's not the claim that the reader is going to remember, it is the story and the impression that the story gives about who you are. As you can see, writing a strong recommendation is no small task, so, choosing your recommenders is very important. You are applying to be a university student. So, admissions officers always want to hear from your teachers. At least one, if not two, of your letters should come from a teacher. It's also a good idea, for one of those teachers to be from a class related to your major. Engineers or science majors, you should have a letter of recommendation from a math or science teacher. Fine arts majors, you should have a recommendation from a fine arts teacher. Additional recommendations can come from non-teachers. In fact after two or three teacher letters, they all kind of start to sound the same, and usually they all say the same thing. So, having letters from someone other than a teacher, can actually add variety to what this, what the admission officer is learning about you. Examples of folks other than teachers include a boss if you have a job or a coach if you play a sport, or even the director of an activity that you participate in. It probably sounds silly, but when choosing your recommenders, you should choose people who know you well and who like you. It's not that a letter should be only great things about you, but writing a strong letter of recommendation takes time and it also takes a somewhat special relationship. Someone that you have a good relationship with, will be more likely to put in the needed time and effort, and they're also more likely to have better stories to tell about you. If you get a letter from someone who doesn't know you well, or from someone who doesn't really like you, it's very easy for the reader to tell. Culturally, using letters of recommendation is common in the U.S., but it might not be common in your home country. In fact, in some cultures, recommendations or the idea of a recommendation. Doesn't exist at all. That can make it tough, not only to get a letter, but especially to get a good letter. It's your job, to educate your recommenders

about what is expected in a good U.S. style letter of recommendation. You are probably going to have to teach your teachers. There are two really good online resources that you can read and also direct your recommenders to. One is from our friends at MIT, and what makes the site great is because there are a number of different sample recommendations. And critiques about what make those samples good or bad. The other resource is through Purdue's online writing lab. And that resource is wonderful because it actually gives recommenders, step by step instructions about writing a strong letter. Now remember, these are guides. The sample letters on these websites are not meant to be copied, only to be used as reference. These are guides about writing a letter of recommendation, but you will also guide your writers. Students get nervous about the letter of recommendation because they feel like they can't control it, which is really not true. Now understand, you cannot write your own letter of recommendation, even if your recommender asks you to. It's a violation of application guidelines. You can however, help your writers know what to write about. Here at the ELP, and at many high schools around the world, students have to fill out a form before a teacher or counselor can write them a letter of recommendation. These forms give a lot of really great information, from simple information like when you need the letter and how the teacher will have to submit the letter to more important information, like special projects that you worked with the teacher on. Or, even themes or things that you plan to highlight in your application. We talked about the value of having stories in your recommendations. When you remind a teacher about, maybe that extra research that you did together. Or how they helped you practice for your musical performance, or how you would discuss topics even after class is finished. You might be surprised about the stories that make it into your letter. Sharing your themes is also important. If one of your themes, is that you're an active learner who is always asking questions, you don't want a teacher to write about how quiet you were in class. A contradiction or disagreement like this will confuse the reader and they won't know who to believe. A strong letter of recommendation is a shared responsibility between you and the writer. It is your responsibility, to give the writer materials to build with, and it is their responsibility to use the materials to build a good letter. Sharing the responsibility, also helps ease anxiety, because you're probably never going to see your letter. Letters of recommendation are meant to be confidential, which means that you might never see a letter that is written about you. When you fill out your application form, you will be asked whether or not you want to waive, or give up your rights to see your letters of recommendation. You have the choice to either keep or waive your rights, but I encourage you to waive them. First, when writers know that you will not see your letter, they feel more at ease to be honest, and honest letters are usually better letters. Second, while waiving your rights is optional, admission officers are human. And, if you don't waive your right, it brings up some questions. What did you think the person was going to write about you? What were you worried that they were going to say, that you want to read the letter. You chose your recommenders. And hopefully, discussed writing the letter together. Trust your recommenders and waive your rights to access the letter afterwards. Furthermore keeping your rights only actually allows you to see the letters at the school that you eventually attend. And many schools will destroy the letters of recommendation after the application cycle is completed. So, it is really a better idea to waive your rights. When submitting your letters, you're going to have the choice between submitting an electronic version online, or submitting a paper version by post. Schools will always prefer the online submission. It's faster, easier to process, and there are less mixups between letters. If online submission is difficult for your recommender, either due to English language skills or internet

connectivity, most schools will allow you to submit a paper copy of the letter. If you submit a paper copy of your letter, remember that like your academic documents, they must be official copies. To be official, they should be written on official school paper, and they should be signed by the writer. Again, if you cannot get multiple official copies, then you might have to get attested copies. One thing that we have only touched on, is the English language abilities of your recommenders. You always have to submit an English language version of your letters. But, they do not have to be written in English. Meaning, if your recommenders can write a better letter. In your native language, have them write the letter in your native language, and then have the letter translated into English. Like your academic documents, you will have to submit both your official native language version, version and the official English translation. Language should not stop you from getting a good letter of recommendation. Getting a strong letter of recommendation takes time and you have to plan for it. On your calendar, be sure to mark dates when you plan on requesting your letters. Also mark dates, where you follow up with your writers, and, mark dates when you want your letters to be finished. Students seem to think that recommenders can write a good letter in a day, but this is usually not the case. Your recommenders are busy people. And while your letter is important, writing your letter is not the only thing that they have to do. I encourage my students to give their writers at least four weeks to write the letter. With less time, the writer might rush to finish the letter and it might not be as good. With more time, the writer might put your request aside, and possibly forget about it. After you request the letter, make sure that you check in with the writer periodically, maybe every couple of weeks or so just to see if they need any more information. A letter of recommendation is a process. You have to request the letter, someone has to write it, you might have to have it translated, and then it must be submitted. The process could take days, weeks, or months. Make sure you plan for it. Students always ask how important these letters are in the final decision, and as always, it depends on the school. Now, this is of course, assuming that your letter doesn't say anything really bad about you. Understand that you are never going to be judged on how strong or weak your letter is. If your letter is weak, and many recommendation letters are, it is not going to hurt you, but its not going to help you. Remember, its about submitting an application, its about submitting your best application possible. And that includes your letters of recommendation. Help yourself, by making sure your letters of recommendation are just as strong as the rest of your application. [BLANK_AUDIO]