

## **Tips on Writing Letters of Recommendation for Admission to High School or College**

Peter F. DiGiammarino

### **I. Background**

Students, parents, teachers, and those who write letters of recommendation for admission to a high school or college often underestimate how much of a difference the recommendation makes. Those who take recommendations seriously and who work to make them the best they can, find it a relatively easy way to get an edge on the competition.

This note is a compilation of tips related to recommendations. Section II presents tips for the one writing a recommendation. Section III presents tips for those who request recommendations to be written on their behalf. An example letter of recommendation is then presented.

In addition to personal experience, these tips come from discussions with high school guidance counselors and people who are part of the admissions process at a number of private high schools, universities, and colleges including Harvard, Princeton, University of Massachusetts, and scholarship programs including the Rhodes scholarship.

From these sources it is clear that the standardized tests and grades top the list of factors considered important in judging an application. For example they note that:

- SAT and ACT scores have proven to be the best predictor of how a student will perform in their first year of college
- Grades, factored for the school attended and courses taken, are far and away the best predictor of how well a student will perform overall.

After grades and scores, the most important source of input is uniformly considered to be letters of recommendation.

While it would take a heroic effort to follow all of these tips, those who do will stand out as having a take-charge attitude that breeds success.

## **II. Tips on Writing a Recommendation**

### **Be selective**

Only accept the task to write a recommendation when you have the energy, time and interest to do a good job and when the applicant and the school are well matched. If you feel the applicant is not right for the school then tell that to the student.

It is easy, especially for teachers who write many recommendations, to slip into a format that is so generic that it fails to differentiate one student from another. If not committed to doing a first-rate job, it may be in everyone's best interest to refer the applicant elsewhere.

### **Write to, not just about, the applicant**

Whether or not you plan to send a copy to the applicant, it is best to imagine that he or she will see the final product. This raises the stakes and motivates you to provide some of the best and most important feedback the applicant might ever receive.

### **Know your subject**

Spend some quality one-on-one time with the applicant just prior to writing the recommendation to get in touch with what is important to them. For example, go on a long walk and ask questions to make the applicant think. Draw them out. Do not say anything to impact their thinking. Simply seek to understand. This guarantees an intimate connection that provides ample material with which to work.

### **Prepare**

Read the applicant's personal statements, review the resume and work samples, and contemplate time spent together. Before beginning to write, draft a rough outline of the key themes and major points you plan to make.

### **Establish credibility**

It is important to establish your own credibility in three distinct ways. Specifically, it must be clear that you

- Have intimate knowledge of the applicant;
- Know the school's values, objectives, and culture; and
- Are able to objectively evaluate the match for this applicant with this school.

A recommendation from a heavy-hitter will carry more weight but only if it is clear that he or she really knows and understands the applicant and the school.

The objective is to be seen as an extension of the admissions committee with the school's interests at heart, and having applied considerable judgment to the case at hand. Below is an example:

*I have worked with over 2,000 students and young adults over the past thirty years having been a business executive, camp counselor, Sunday school teacher, soccer coach, and an occasional classroom teacher. I have guest lectured at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan School of Management, the Stanford Business School, George Mason University Business School, and the Stonier School of Banking. I have also personally recruited and mentored dozens of new employees as they enter the business world from the nation's top MBA schools*

### **Create a vision**

Describe specifically what the applicant might become or accomplish to make them and their future come alive, particularly in a manner that is consistent with the school's values and goals. For example, if you can see the applicant playing to a full house at Carnegie Hall or presiding as a judge in a tense courtroom some day, say so. Such imagery is a powerful way to drive home a point about just how special this applicant is.

People need to know that we have expectations, hopes and dreams for them to accomplish. If you share your recommendation with the applicant, the images you project about their future may inspire and stay with them perhaps their entire lives.

### **Target growth**

Mention what you know the candidate is working on getting better at in order to add balance and improve credibility by revealing an intimate and constructive connection with the applicant, not just a passing interest.

### **Promote strengths**

Everybody shines at something. In that spirit, rank the candidate in the top 3-5 of all people you have ever known in some dimension or capacity. This is the crown jewel of a good recommendation. You have established your credibility and breadth of perspective, made it clear that you know the student and are in touch with school values. It is time to think deeply and to identify precisely, compared to everyone you have ever known, what this student is really good at that is important to the school.

For example, consider how powerful it is to say:

*Among all the adolescents, teens and young adults that I have worked with in my twenty years of teaching, I rank Susan in the top five in terms of native intelligence, sensitivity to others, and social consciousness.*

**Be specific**

Throughout the recommendation, use specific and detailed examples that illustrate important points to bring them alive, and eliminate empty phrases. For example, rather than saying that *the applicant is a strong individual performer* make specific mention of what you personally know that gives evidence to the statement. The following excerpt is an example:

*Frank has participated principally in the sport of Tae Kwon Do and he is fond of hiking; both activities he has engaged in with formal groups outside of school. These activities are similar in that they are performed by individuals who happen to be a group but not a team. Frank has not developed a strong tie to a team or a club such as a football or soccer team or scouts. He is more comfortable participating as an individual. I do not see this as a weakness so much as an indication that Frank's personality is more that of an artist or craftsman who operates with great skill and accomplishment as an individual performer.*

**Be concise**

After more than a page, the reader might lose interest or feel like they have to work too hard to get the point. You may need to tighten the focus. For example, if you ran the soup kitchen the student has volunteered at for the last five years, then focus on community involvement and not on academic or athletic accomplishments. If the applicant is a friend, focus primarily on character and coming of age.

### **III. Tips on Selecting and Preparing a Person to Write a Recommendation**

#### **Be selective**

It is best to select someone who knows the school and even better if it is someone with whom the school is familiar, such as an alumnus with a strong record of financial support. Talk through the reasons why this school is right for you.

It is vital that the writer agree wholeheartedly that the choice is a good one because their concern or support will show through in what they write. If there is any question along these lines then draw them out and take their input graciously. It could be among the best advice and counsel you ever receive.

#### **Become known**

Target the person to write your recommendation far in advance so you can develop a close connection. The better the person knows you, the better the recommendation can be. If someone does not know you well, it is not possible for them to write a compelling recommendation. Select someone who will take time to get to know you by talking to you, reading what you write, and who will spend some time with you with no agenda other than to get to know you better.

If you target a classroom teacher, coach, or instructor (e.g., for dance or music), take the time to engage in interactions outside the normal venue. The extra dimension will make you more special to them and will let them get to see more of the whole you. You might invite them to dinner or for a walk a few weeks before the recommendation is due.

#### **Aim high**

Select someone who writes well and whose input will be regarded highly. For example, the long-time, well-respected head of a thriving high school academic department might be a better choice than a first-year teacher. On the other hand, keep in mind that the school will ignore input from heavy-hitters unless they know you well.

With enough lead-time you can target to become known to anyone you have access to, so aim high and be proactive. Your recommendations, collectively, need to reflect a whole person. If the application requires a guidance counselor, a teacher and a free choice, don't make the third one academic too.

Top schools look for talent beyond just academic performance and SAT scores, and appreciate references that speak to other talents, interests, abilities and efforts that add dimension to their campus. If only three recommendations are required, it is okay to send a fourth if it adds perspective, but never send more than one extra.

#### **Secure commitment**

Secure the commitment to write a recommendation long before the deadline. Set expectations about when you will provide materials and forms and when the recommendation is due. Given several months notice, there is plenty of time to work the required effort into even a hectic schedule.

### **Provide background**

About three to four weeks prior to the due date, provide the person writing your recommendation with:

- A signed cover letter asking for the recommendation with specific points that you would like them to make, including one or two detailed examples they might mention. Rest assured that it is fine to be perfectly clear about what you want covered to seed their thinking without compromising to the integrity of the process because there is no obligation for them to use what you provide.
- A resume or an equivalent document that summarizes what you have done, and what you are proud of having accomplished, in chronological order.
- Personal statements and essays from the application that the letter of recommendation will support. These help communicate what is important to you and prepares the writer to reinforce and be consistent with your points.
- Work samples you are proud of having completed.
- A photograph of yourself to bring you powerfully to mind when working on your recommendation.
- Stamped, addressed envelopes, with properly and fully filled out forms to make the mechanics as easy as possible. In the lower left hand corner of the envelope record a date a few days in advance of when the recommendation must be mailed.
- A copy of these *Tips on Writing Letters of Recommendation for Acceptance to High School or College*.

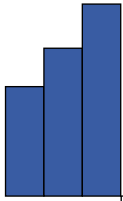
Package the above in a form that is consistent with who you are and deliver it. Thoughtful preparation signals that this matters a lot to you and that the assignment should be taken seriously. Go through the materials in person or on the phone, answer any questions and confirm that the commitment to complete the task on time is intact. Indicate that you will call a day or two in advance of the mail-date to be sure the recommendation is on track to get out on time.

### **Follow through**

Arrange to confirm that the recommendation was sent in, perhaps by receiving a copy but only after it has been sent in and only if it does not compromise the content in any way. A few days later, check with the school to be sure that the application and all the recommendations were received.

Send a thank-you letter to the writer and when your application is accepted or rejected, send another note to let them know how things turned out.

Finally, keep the writer informed of your progress because you just might need them to write another recommendation someday!



# IntelliVen, L.L.C.

Intelligent Strategies...Successful Ventures

January 30, 2008

Ms. Sandra Lenthum  
Senior Associate Director of Admissions  
Undergraduate Admissions Office  
Mather Building  
37 Mather Drive  
University of Saville  
Brenton, MA 01003  
Fax: 418-555-2620

Dear Ms. Lenthum:

Please accept this letter in support of Mr. Rodney Charles Jones's application for admission to The University of Saville at Brenton. In order to identify his application please know that Mr. Jones's date of birth is September 19, 1990 and his application was submitted on-line using the Common Application.

I have known Rodney for more than ten years. His father and I are business colleagues and close friends since 1997. Rodney worked as an intern and part-time employee in my Information Technology department when I was president of Georgestone Consulting Group, a \$30M strategy consulting firm based in DC.

I have a keen interest in youth and their development through college and into their professional lives. Over the past 30 years, I have served as a camp counselor, a youth soccer and baseball coach, a Sunday school teacher, a Board Member of a private school, and nurtured three daughters from high-school and college through to graduate school and career launch. I also serve on the Saville Foundation Board and the College Advisory Board where I am helping to guide the renaissance of the Bachelor's Degree with Concentration in economics and sociology that I myself graduated from, with honors, in 1975.

While my profession is business, I am a serial-CEO now serving The Carlyle Group as Chairman and CEO of one of their portfolio companies, I have taught, coached, or mentored over 3,000 children, young adults, and professionals including in classes at MIT, Stanford, George Mason University, and the Stonier School of Banking.

In all my years of working with students, youth, and young professionals I rate Rodney in the top 5% in terms of native intelligence and the ability to set a vision and then manage resources to achieve the specific goal he sets out to accomplish. He is quick to tackle any topic or challenge he is presented with and sets out to address it aggressively in order to achieve his goal. For example, he personally is responsible for his school newspaper and for managing over a dozen fellow students at a time to put on plays. He has learned to stay calm under pressure, even when things do not go as planned, in order to marshal resources to get the paper out and the show on schedule!

We saw early signs of his ability to stay cool under pressure and to *get the job done* at Georgestone where, even as a high school freshman, he was comfortable working with agitated adults who were frustrated with their IT problems. Rodney treated them with respect but also conversed with us (myself included) on a

1750 Tysons Blvd., Fourth Floor / McLean, VA 22102

Tel: 703.744.1419 / Fax: 703.744.1001

[www.intelliven.com](http://www.intelliven.com)

Please Do Not Copy or Distribute Without Author's Permission

Tips on Writing Letters of Recommendation for Admission to High School or College

par-level about the problem that he then always addressed professionally, promptly, and thoroughly. He always showed up to work on time, put in extra hours when needed even on weekends, and always made sure even our special needs were met.

Rodney now seeks to attend a school that is strong in sociology, information technology, political science, and economics. He has told me that he believes Saville is an ideal place to pursue these interests because of the resources, culture, and areas of available study; for example, he is impressed and much encouraged to find that Saville has a major in Social Thought and Political Economy and that it is a member of the Internet2 coalition. I could not agree more. I can see Rodney as Saville's first Rhodes Scholar on track to a career in politics with a capstone to serve some day in the statehouse or even congress

While his grades and scores may not yet put him on track for the Honors track, I have every confidence that, given the opportunity, he will soar both academically and socially to earn his way into the program. Rodney is a free spirit who thinks for himself and who is not inclined to follow the course of public option. He told me that even the University's slogan, "*Declare Your Intellectual Freedom*," speaks volumes to him as he sorts out his own intellectual proclivities.

I have every confidence that Rodney will grow and mature into a fine young man and a fulfilled adult. What he needs now is rigorous academic challenge with a culture that supports social change and community development such as what I know he will find at the University of Saville. As a result, I ENTHUSIASTICALLY recommend Rodney Jones for admission to The University of Saville:

Should you like to receive any further input from me, please contact me at 703-283-0133 or via email at: [peterd@intelliven.com](mailto:peterd@intelliven.com).

Most Sincerely Yours,



Peter F. DiGiammarino  
Chairman & CEO

**About the author.**

PeterD grew up in Lexington, Massachusetts ten miles outside of Boston the oldest of six children whose parents and 4 paternal uncles were all public school teachers, coaches, and camp counselors. He has worked with some 3,000 students and young adults over the past 30 years having been a business executive, camp counselor, Sunday school teacher, soccer coach, and an occasional classroom teacher. He has guest-lectured at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan School of Management, the Stanford Business School, George Mason University Business School, and the Stonier School of Banking and recruited and mentored young professionals as they enter the business world from the nations top MBA schools.

He graduated from the University of Massachusetts with Honors and an interdisciplinary major in Computer Science, Economics and Mathematics and from the MIT Sloan School of Management with a master's degree. His profession is to build businesses that apply information technology to advance commercial and government interests. His passion is to help young adults complete their higher education and transition into the working world.