

## **Step 1: Brainstorm**

Ah brainstorming, that oft suggested but little used first step. While perhaps you can afford to skip this step in other pieces of writing, I strongly recommend taking the time to do some mental mapping before writing your peer recommendation. The reason for this is that the best recommendation letters are focused and specific.

They highlight the most important strengths and impressive qualities in the applicants. Rather than presenting someone as well-rounded in everything, the most memorable reference letters zero in on particular areas. Then they tell specific stories that illustrate and, in a sense, provide evidence for these qualities. There are three main questions you should ask yourself before you start outlining and drafting:

- 1 What qualities most impress me about my peer?
- 2 What specific examples and anecdotes can I provide to demonstrate these qualities?
- 3 What tone should I use to best express my recommendation?

Let's consider each of these questions individually. First, what qualities do you want to highlight?

### **Personal Qualities and Traits**

As you start brainstorming, try to come up with a list of the qualities that most impress you and others about your friend. Is s(he) exceptionally loyal? Supportive? Confident? Adventurous? How about encouraging, mature, energetic, insightful, or brilliant?

This is a great stage to consult with your friend and get a sense of what she's writing about in his/her application or if she's applying to any particular program. If she's highlighting her passion for world events and multicultural exchange, for example, you could talk about that time you both went on the school trip to Europe and she conversed with all the people you met. If she's applying to be pre-med, you could talk about her passion for helping people and somewhat annoying tendency to pick science documentaries on movie nights.

In other words, find out what your friend is saying in other parts of her application, as well as what's missing. Then figure out how you can both complement and add further dimension to her story.

Once you have your list, try to narrow it down to the three or four qualities that best characterize your friend. Consider whether they're the type of qualities that will impress admissions officers (though don't worry too much about this; you don't want your letter to read as if you're just saying what you think they'd like to hear). What I mean is stating that your friend is always the life of the party might come off as immature, whereas saying she takes on a role of leadership in group situations and has a great talent for mobilizing and energizing people might be interpreted more favorably.

Once you've narrowed down the traits you'd like to focus on in your letter, you can move onto the second phase of brainstorming: thinking of specific stories and examples.

## **Anecdotes and Examples**

Which of these excerpts is more effective:

1. Anna is a kind person who loves to help others. She is a caring friend and student.
2. When Anna realized our school didn't provide any orientation for new students, she organized a club called New Kids on the Block, where new and established students get together to have lunch and share their experiences. This is just one example of her kind and loving spirit and drive to make everyone feel connected and included.

The first is fine, but it doesn't do much to differentiate Anna from other applicants whose friends speak of their kind and caring nature. The second, though, proves that Anna cares about others and paints a picture of her organizing a club and bringing students together in the school.

Just like you use examples to support your points in a persuasive essay for English class, you can use meaningful stories to illuminate your friend's character. This will sound more powerful and effective, plus it will help your letter stand out among the rest. This approach will make it a more interesting piece of writing overall, rather than a list of positive adjectives that blend together before a tired admission officer's eyes. In other words, don't just tell the college how great your friend is. Show them.

## **Think About Tone**

Finally, I would suggest considering tone and style. Your recommendation doesn't have to sound especially formal, like most teachers and counselors' letters would. As a peer, you can write more intimately and personally, as well as inject humor into your writing. At the same time, don't try to be funny if comical writing isn't your strong suit. Instead, choose the tone that's most authentic for you and can most powerfully communicate a vision of your friend. Perhaps most important is to sound earnest, sincere, and heartfelt. After you've brainstormed and determined the focus of your letter, it's time to start outlining and drafting. The following structure is a helpful guide for most peer recommendation letters.

## **Step 2: Outline and Draft**

Letters of recommendation are typically one page. It may go onto a second page, but I wouldn't advise making it much longer than that. While you can be creative in your presentation, there are a few key elements that all rec letters should include. Let's start with what should go into the introduction.

### **Introduction**

At the beginning of your evaluation, you should state your support for your friend's application to the school. You should also say who you are, what your relationship to the applicant is, and how long you've known her. This gives weight to your qualifications to assess the applicant. If there are any other special circumstances that make you an especially good person to evaluate her, then you can include those as well.

All of these elements - your statement of support, introduction of yourself, and qualifier of your relationship - could be wrapped into one, or stated separately, like in these few examples.

I'm so excited to picture Allie on Dartmouth's campus. I have no doubt that she will bring the same infectious energy, silly humor, and deep friendship with her that she's shown to me and our peers all through high school.

I'm honored and excited to provide this statement of support for David, who I recommend without reservation for Davidson College.

When I was the nervous new kid in 6th grade, Sam didn't hesitate to invite me to sit next to her at lunch and show me around the school. Her caring and compassion for others, combined with her fearlessness in making new friends, makes me completely certain that she'll have no trouble adjusting to college campus life.

From study groups to sleepovers, track meets to a tour bus on our school trip to Italy, I've gotten to know Jess as a student, athlete, explorer, and, most importantly, best friend.

Again, it's up to you to decide how exactly you want to start your recommendation, but your introductory paragraph should include an actual statement of recommendation, along with the context of your relationship to the applicant and hint as to why it makes you qualified to assess him/her. Which brings us to the next part of the letter, the actual evaluation of your friend.

### **Assessment: Description and Stories**

Once you've made the proper introductions, you can dive into the meat of your recommendation: your assessment of and stories about your friend. Again, don't feel like you have to run down the list of every well-rounded quality you can think of. The best recommendation letters dive deep into a few key characteristics, rather than trying to cover everything in one page.

Do you ever hear so much about a person that you feel like you've met her in real life? That's what your letter can help do for admissions officers. Assuming they won't actually meet her, your letter, along with the other recommendations and personal essay, can help your friend come alive as a complex, multi-faceted individual poised to take on a successful role at their college.

In about two paragraphs, you can present what's so impressive about your friend, of course including stories and examples to back it up. Here are a couple examples.

When we got hopelessly lost down the winding alleys of Venice, Jess sprang into action, calling on her advanced knowledge of Italian to communicate with locals and lead us out of the maze.

When David and I go hiking, he has an almost encyclopedic knowledge of both the common and scientific names of every plant, flower, and tree that we walk past.

You might be wondering if you should present weaknesses in your letter. Will discussing only strengths come off as overblown and insincere? Most schools do encourage evaluators to present a balanced view of a candidate, and suggesting areas for growth won't necessarily detract from the impression you make. A good rule of thumb is to present more strengths than weaknesses to balance them out, as well as to suggest how that weakness can be viewed as a strength. For instance,

Sam can be overly critical of herself at times, but she uses her high expectations to be always improving herself. When she scored lower than expected on her first chemistry test, she sprang into study mode and used her disappointment to fuel her motivation and ace the next one. Sam strongly believes in her capacity to continually grow, learn, and improve.

Overall, I believe you can rave about your friend while still maintaining a realistic and balanced tone, along with including the examples and stories to back up your evaluation. Finally, you can use the conclusion to reiterate how much you believe in your friend.

### **Conclusion**

In the conclusion to your peer recommendation, it's a good idea to restate your support for your friend, much as you did in the introduction, as well as describe how you envision her at college. Just like pieces of writing can grab a reader's attention with a strong hook at the beginning, they can leave a memorable impression with a strong statement at the end.

Think of the main impression you want to leave in admissions officers' minds after they finish reading. Why is it in their and the college's best interest to accept your friend?

Brian is the most talented, motivated, and well-spoken person I know. I recommend him enthusiastically for admission to Dartmouth.

Sam has always aspired to study medicine and help make the world a healthier and more equitable place. I truly can't think of anyone better suited for this role.

Who's that person I see in the bustling newsroom, writing groundbreaking stories as lead editor of The Dartmouth one year from today? Oh right, that's Sam. She's doing an amazing job, just as we all knew she would.

### **Step 3: Revision**

Hurray! You have your first draft of your peer recommendation complete. Now how can you make it even better? First off, I would again encourage you to check that you've given explicit examples and stories. Make sure it doesn't sound too abstract and uses anecdotes to demonstrate, rather than simply describe. As they say (whoever "they" is), actions speak louder than words.

Additionally, consider your word choice. Did you use "nice" when "generous" or "compassionate" might have been more appropriate? I'm not saying to use a thesaurus and add long synonyms where plain words work just as well, but check that you're using accurate and powerful words that express exactly what you want to say about your friend. It's also good to avoid cliches and consider how you can phrase your sentences in a fresh and creative way.

In a similar sense, pay close attention to your phrasing and consider whether it could come off in the wrong way. You might want to ask someone else to read it and give you feedback. For instance, you might want to express how close your friendship is by saying, "My friend is so loyal that we've done everything together since elementary school." While this sounds great to you, it might come off as if your friend is

disinterested in connecting with other people. Make sure that your phrasing is on point and won't be taken as a negative when you mean it to be positive.

You may even show the letter to your friend for feedback and comments. This is up to you, as recommendation letters are generally thought to be confidential and you're not obligated to show her.

Once you've made sure the spelling, grammar, and sentence structure is flawless and it reads as a powerful statement of support for your friend, you can go ahead and submit the letter to the college.

#### Step 4: Submit Your Letter

As peer recommender, you absolutely must get your recommendation in by the stated deadline. Make sure you know when that deadline is and exactly how to submit (no frantic midnight phone calls about the Common App website being down or your internet not working).

Your friend will invite you as the "[Other Recommender](#)" on the Common App for Dartmouth, and you'll likely upload your Davidson recommendation [here](#). Once everything's done and submitted, you can give yourself a pat on the back. You're an awesome friend!

### Final Thoughts

An important point (and one that's actually relevant) is that you don't have to be formal, comment on your friend's academic abilities, or try to emulate a teacher or counselor. Instead, your letter can shed light on your friend's personality, character, and social skills.

The best letters are specific and vivid. Rather than using generic praise or speaking in clichés, they are fortified with real examples and stories. Your writing should demonstrate that you know your friend well and are qualified to assess her.

Above all, remember your mission: helping your friend get accepted to college (and probably a selective, competitive college like Dartmouth or Davidson). Convince the admissions officers of your friend's outstanding qualities, and show them why they need her at their school.