

Guide to Letters of Recommendation, Thank You and First Choice Letters

Letters of Recommendation

- You should only provide a letter of recommendation to a school if you're asked for one.
- Some schools may ask for up to a certain number and other schools don't ask for them at all. The best advice is to do exactly what the school request. Provide up to the number they request (and no more) when asked. Don't provide a letter when you aren't asked.
- Schools solicit these in order to get another perspective on your child and family. For that reason, only someone who really knows your family and child should write it. Don't go out of your way to get a letter from someone famous or powerful if they don't really know your family. Don't ask a friend of a friend who is on the board to write the letter if they don't know you because you have no idea what they'll say or how enthusiastic they will sound.
- If you genuinely know someone who is on the board of the school, or who is an alumni or parent at the school, a letter from that person can be very influential. This person should talk about why your child/family would be such a good fit in the community or culture of the school.

Here is an example of a heartfelt letter of recommendation that I wrote for a child a few years ago (the names have been changed). The little girl recommended was offered a spot at this school:

Dear Admissions Director,

I whole-heartedly recommend Rachel Adams for admissions to the X School next fall.

I've known Rachel since she was just 2 days old. I've watched her grow, mature, and turn into a wonderful child and a caring big sister. Rachel's mother, Judith, is not only a dear friend; she has been a role model to me ever since we met.

Let me tell you what Rachel is like. She is creative and artistic, very much like my own daughter. You will often find her drawing, painting, dressing up, acting, or singing.

Rachel is also conceptually creative. Here's what I mean. Recently I spent the weekend with Rachel and her family in Southampton. We were at a home that had no toys, books, or games of interest to children. Several other children had come over to play. Rachel found a bucket of tennis balls in the garage. She brought them into the backyard and gathered the children together for fun and games. First, she created a game similar to basketball where the children tried to throw the balls into a circle, she made with a gardenhose. Then, she organized a game of catch with the tennis balls. Following this, she hid the balls for the children to find. I could go on and on. That day, I just marveled at the inventiveness that Rachel displayed in creating so many activities from a bucket of balls.

Last year, Rachel and her mother went to Rumania to adopt a little sister, Sophie. When Sophie came into the home, life changed dramatically for Rachel. There was a tough adjustment period for the newly adopted child. Mom had to be shared for the first time. And yet, Rachel behaved in a nurturing, kind, and helpful manner to her new sister. Each time I see the two of them together, Rachel protects and supports Sophie. I'm sure there are conflicts, which I haven't seen, but for the most part, Rachel has taken her role as big sister as seriously as a 5-year-old ever could.

Rachel is also independent and curious. My older children both enjoy playing with her because she jumps right into the action and immediately participates. She is quiet in new situations, but I'd never describe her as shy. In her world, Rachel is a leader and a player.

An advantage of having Rachel in school is that you also get her mother in the school community. Her mom is a successful businesswoman, a role model for many (including me). Judith is also incredibly giving, especially to children. Currently she is helping to finance a child at X School whose father's untimely death deeply impacted the family's ability to pay tuition. Judith offered to help on my word that this was a deserving child. I had no expectation that she would volunteer to help this child stay in school, but I was genuinely moved that she did. She has had a major impact on this little girl's life, although the child and her family have no idea that there is an angel watching over them.

In closing, I recommend that Rachel be accepted for kindergarten next year. I am certain that you would truly appreciate having both Rachel and her family in your school community.

Sincerely,

Karen Quinn

Thank You Notes

While these are by no means required, a prompt and personal thank-you note (*not an e-mail*) is certainly appreciated by the admissions staff. A good time to send one would be after the parent interview, when you've had a chance to see the school, form an impression, and meet the admissions director. In your letter, show your appreciation for the time they took with your child and family. State your continuing interest in the school and express why you feel it is the right place for your child and family. Ideally, you should say something that shows the director you were listening to what she said, or refer to something that happened during your visit that she will remember. With so many

families passing through an admissions office each season, you want to be sure that the director remembers you in a positive way.

First-Choice Letters

- In some parts of the country, it is common for families to send “first choice” letters to schools they would definitely accept were the school to offer their child a place.
- Some schools do take these into consideration when deciding whether or not to accept a family. Others do not. During your interview at a school, you should ask the director what their policy is on first choice letters, whether they want them and if they consider them in the acceptance decision. You don’t want to waste a first choice letter on a school that won’t consider it.
- Only send one of these if you are absolutely committed to saying “yes” to the school should they offer your child a place. While a first choice letter doesn’t create a legal obligation to accept, it does create a moral obligation. You’d have to have a pretty good reason to change your mind after sending one.

Here is an example of what you might say in a first choice letter:

Dear ...,

Steve and I wanted to thank you again for the time you have taken to get to know our son and family as you have considered Adam’s application for kindergarten next year. We would also like to assure you that X School is our first choice among the schools we visited and should Adam be offered a place, we would gladly accept.

We know how hard it must be for you to select students among the many qualified candidates who apply. We have also been impressed by the wonderful qualities provided by the schools we have visited as we considered where Adam would be most likely to

succeed in the years ahead. After visiting several schools, it is clear to us that no school is a better match for our son and family than X.

Your community of children and families appear so solid and welcoming to us. Your high standards and academic approach are just right for a motivated child such as Adam. Your philosophy and values match those of our family. Adam loves to play sports and the drums. Your athletic and music programs are among the best in the city. In short, we believe that X School is a place where Adam will flourish in every way.

We hope that you will look closely at Adam's application for next year's kindergarten class. Should he be lucky enough to be offered a place, we assure you that we would accept. Further, we would do everything we could to support our both our son's and the school's success in every way possible. Thank you again for your time and consideration. We look forward to hearing from you in February.

Sincerely,

Mr. and Mrs. Adam's Parents