

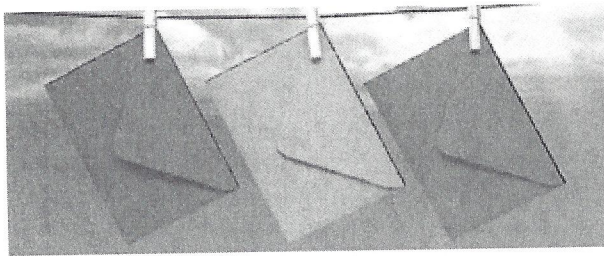
How to Be Letter-Perfect

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Tips on writing a student's college recommendation

By Jeanne Fornarola

For a high school senior who hopes to major in dance in college, a letter of recommendation from the studio teacher who spent years training her can be invaluable. But for you, the teacher, writing that letter can be a chore as well as an honor, as you search for the right words and try to figure out what the college really wants to learn from you. Here are some guidelines.



Establish who you are. In your opening paragraph, state how many years you have known the student and in what capacity (technique class, company member, student assistant). Defining your relationship to the student lends credibility to your letter.

Discuss what the audition can't assess. Your letter should list and describe the qualities of the student that an audition won't reveal and that a resume or transcript may not include. Can the student accept and retain corrections? Is she disciplined? How's her work ethic? Does she make a contribution to the studio environment beyond her dancing?

A college dance department involves a lot of teamwork; its administrators will want to know if an applicant is socially and emotionally balanced, service oriented and helpful, or a good role model to other students.

They'll also be looking beyond applicants' technique to spot those who can contribute to the choreographic and creative process. Applicants who are articulate and well spoken or who write well will be of particular interest since many schools offer classes in such subjects as dance history, criticism, and pedagogy. If your student has strong leadership traits or is a sincere, kind, and generous spirit, say so.

Familiarize yourself with the college. Visit its dance department's website and study its mission statement, curriculum, and objectives. These can help you tailor your letter to address those areas the department deems important. They also provide clues to whether the program and your student are well matched.

Be honest. Don't overstate the student's abilities. Be complimentary but realistic. If you feel you cannot sincerely recommend a student, politely decline. A letter that's insincere or halfhearted will do more harm than good.

Pay attention to format. Proofread your letter for grammar and spelling. Be concise—keep the letter to one page. Provide professional contact information for follow-up. Use standard margins and fonts. Double-check your letter's organization and flow of ideas. Be sure to include an introductory and concluding paragraph. If you're submitting your letter directly to the student, place it in an envelope and sign your name across the seal. As a courtesy, provide a copy to the student for her records and use a pdf format if you are sending it electronically. Always use studio letterhead if you have it.

Use good letter etiquette. Write in a clear and formal tone. Remember that you are talking to other professionals in the field and are representing the student to her future teachers. Meet deadlines for submission.

Use a letter request form. Lots of students pass through your school, and you may think you know all of them personally—but when one of them asks you to write a recommendation letter, you may draw a blank. So, when a student requests such a letter, have her fill out a request form. With its help, you can easily recall all that the student has accomplished and write a well-constructed letter that will help her cause.

Sample Request Form for Letter of Recommendation

- * Name
- * College applying to
- * College website
- * Full name, job title, and contact information of person to whom letter is addressed
- * Any instructions from college on letter's length, content, or format
- * College mailing address
- * Deadline for submitting letter
- * Years of study at your studio
- * Summer study or additional training
- * Performances you took part in
- * Extracurricular activities

* High school GPA

* Why do you want to go to this particular college?

* What are your career goals?