

Writing Effective Letters of Recommendation

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2:00 PM (EST)

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Introduction

Objectives

1. Review the importance of the recommendation writing
2. Review recommendation writing strategies and action steps.
3. Review the differences between counselor and teacher recommendations
4. Discuss organizational strategies how to start the writing process..



Key Knowledge Areas

THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR RECOMMENDATION PROCESS

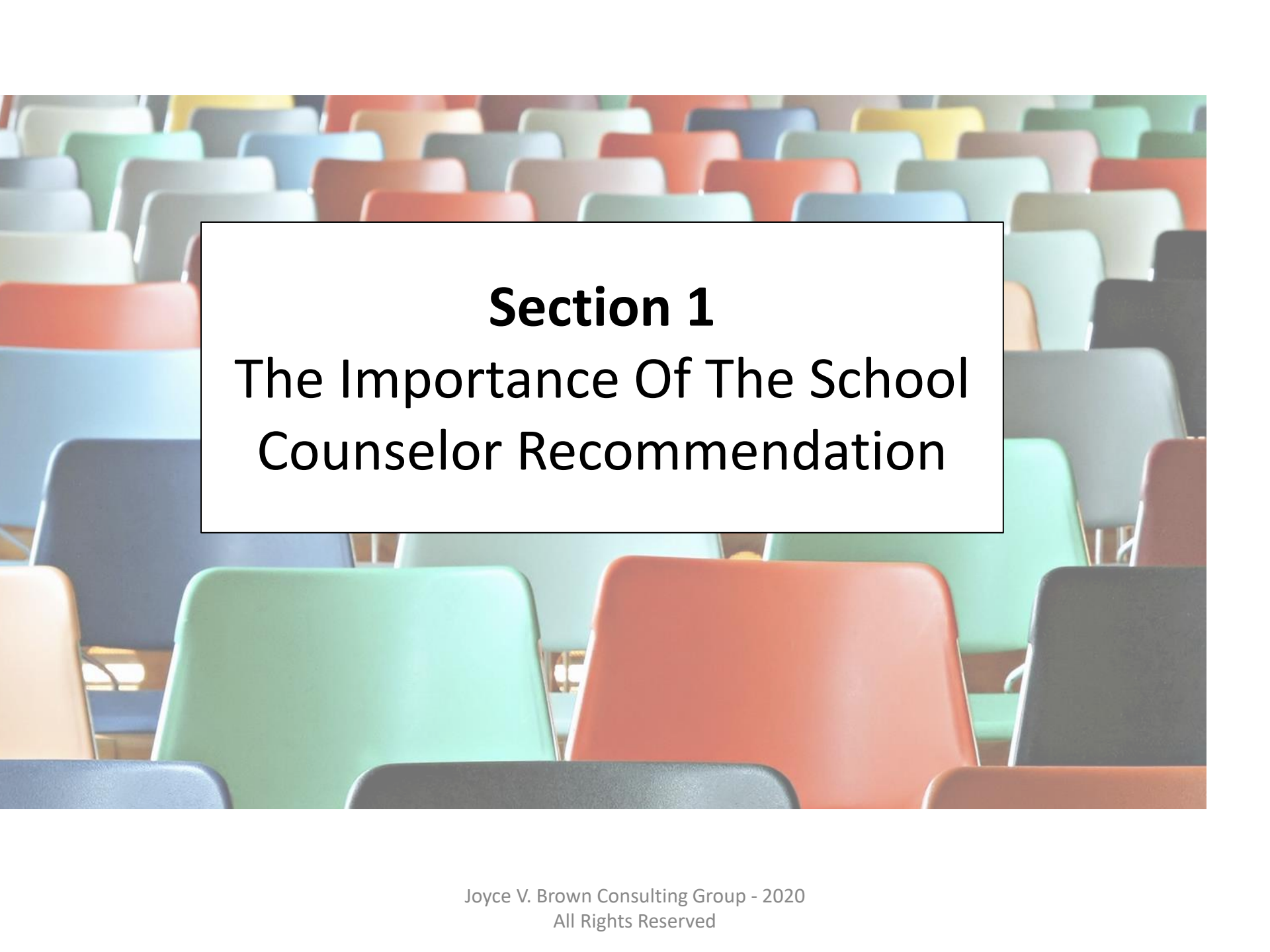
Defining The What

Understanding The SC Role

Implementing The How

AGENDA

1	The Importance Of The School Counselor Recommendation
2	How Colleges Use Recommendations
3	Building A Recommendation Writing System
4	Recommendation Overview Key Components
5	Getting Started Strategies Structuring Your Recommendation
6	Writing Strategies Basic Do's and Don'ts



Section 1

The Importance Of The School Counselor Recommendation

Polling Question 1

Does the size of your caseload prevent you from writing effective letters of recommendation?

1. Yes
2. No

Polling Question 2

Do last minute student and parent requests hinder your ability to write effective recommendation letters?

1. Yes
2. No

DEFINITION

RECOMMENDATION WRITING

A document in which the writer **assesses the qualities, characteristics and capabilities** of the person applying for a position or activity.

A statement from a specific person (**HS Counselor or Teacher**) or any other person that knows you and your academic background well.

Categories Of Recommenders

People who accept a request to submit a letter of recommendation are known as recommenders.

Recommender Categories

1. **Counselor** Recommendations
2. **Teacher** Recommendations – Provides information about your academic progress
3. **General Recommendations**
These are outside recommenders who are not attached to the school.
(Employer, Pastor, Community Organization.)
General Recommendations
highlights activities that the student is involved in outside of the school setting.

The Difference Between Counselor and And Teacher Recommendations

Teacher Recommendation

Convey the teacher's **classroom experiences** with the students.

Provides colleges an idea about how the student is likely to **perform academically**.

Counselor Recommendations


Provides an **overview of the students to discuss his or her academic, extracurricular, and volunteer activities and personal life** if it is relevant.

IMPORTANCE OF THE COUNSELOR RECOMMENDATIONS

NOTE: Teacher recommendation's emphasize a student's academic abilities and attitude toward learning in the classroom setting.

- The counselor recommendation letter is given **serious consideration by admissions committees.**
- Writing a strong letter of support is one more way that counselors can advocate for their students and help them achieve their academic and personal goals. Admissions stalker!
- A counselor can focus more on the student's **personal growth and role within the school community.**
- School counselors can speak to the student's strength of character and interpersonal skills, as well as the student's goals during and following college.

What Gets In The Way?



Section 2

How Colleges Use Recommendations

Polling Question 3

School counselors can just write a few lines about a student because colleges do not read all of the recommendations they receive.

- 1. Agree**
- 2. Disagree**

FACT

- 1. Colleges Read Recommendations!**
- 2. Counselor Recommendations Matter!**
- 3. Be as honest as you can!**

Polling Question 4

How many **student information areas** do admission officers seek to identify through reading a letter of recommendation?

1. Two
2. Three
3. Four
4. Five
5. Six

What Colleges Look For In A Recommendation Letter

1. The students potential to succeed
2. Personal and academic strengths
3. Work style
4. Character qualities
5. How the student handles difficulties or obstacles
6. Personal passions



How Are Letters Of Recommendations Used By Colleges

1. Brings to **life the student** for the admission committee
2. Used **in conjunction** with the students transcript and test scores and other information provided by the student on the application.

How Are Letters Of Recommendations Used By Colleges

1. Recommendations can play a pivotal role in the application process. Especially, **for students with mediocre grades or low scores** on admissions tests can benefit.
2. A written informative assessment can help **establish the students credibility** with the admission office.

Polling Question 5

Which of the following areas do colleges use letters of recommendation to support admission decisions?

1. Evaluate a student's academic preparation
2. Interpret the transcript and address any negative grades.
3. To cross reference and verify a student's strengths and weaknesses
4. Gain insights into student character and potential to thrive at an institution.
5. All of the above.

How Are Letters Of Recommendations Used By Colleges

1. Helps **to evaluate a students academic preparation**
2. Used to **interpret the transcript** and address any negative grades.
3. Used as a **cross reference for verifying a students strengths and weaknesses**
4. Provides **insights into a student character and potential** to thrive at the school.

**How
Recommendations
Support Student
Admission**

**School
Counselor
Words Matter!**

1. Supports **merit-based scholarship** candidates at any college.
 2. Supports **borderline admissible candidates** at any college.
 3. Supports **competitive candidates** at the most selective colleges.
- When reviewing and making decisions on candidates from your school, **colleges rely on your *words* to help the admission staff make accurate and fair assessments of students.**
 - The more history your school has with a college, the more important your recommendation letters become.

EXCELLENT	GOOD RATINGS	AVERAGE RATINGS
<p>Recommendations and strong supporting evidence show that people are deeply impressed with student's personal qualities " Statements like "best student ever" appear in recommendations</p>	<p>Tangible evidence that student has made a definite impact on others " Slightly less spectacular than the "once in a lifetime" or "best student ever".</p>	<p>Recommendation speak highly of student, but are more "standard in nature". Recommendation letter could have been written for many students " Counselor support is "average".</p>



Section 3

BUILDING A RECOMMENDATION WRITING SYSTEM

Elephant In The Room

Critical
Question

Do you
believe your
words
matter?

Polling Question 6

Which of the following do you currently request to gain student information.

1. Student information sheet
2. Parent brag sheet
3. Teacher assessment
4. Peer recommendation
5. Resume
6. None of the above

Establish A

Recommendation

Writing System

Recommendations
should reflect
information
that students
provide.

- **Delivery Guidelines** - Allow two weeks to process recommendation requests.
- **Planning** - Applications take time to write
- **Publicize guidelines** with parents and students.
- **Gather student information** - A recommendation should reflect student information

Obtaining student information strategies

1. Student Information Sheet
2. Parent Brag Sheet
3. Peer Recommendation

Step 1

**Acknowledge that
recommendation
writing takes time.**

Step 2

Non-Negotiable
Documents

Obtain From All
Students!

Commit to Establishing The Following Information Protocols:

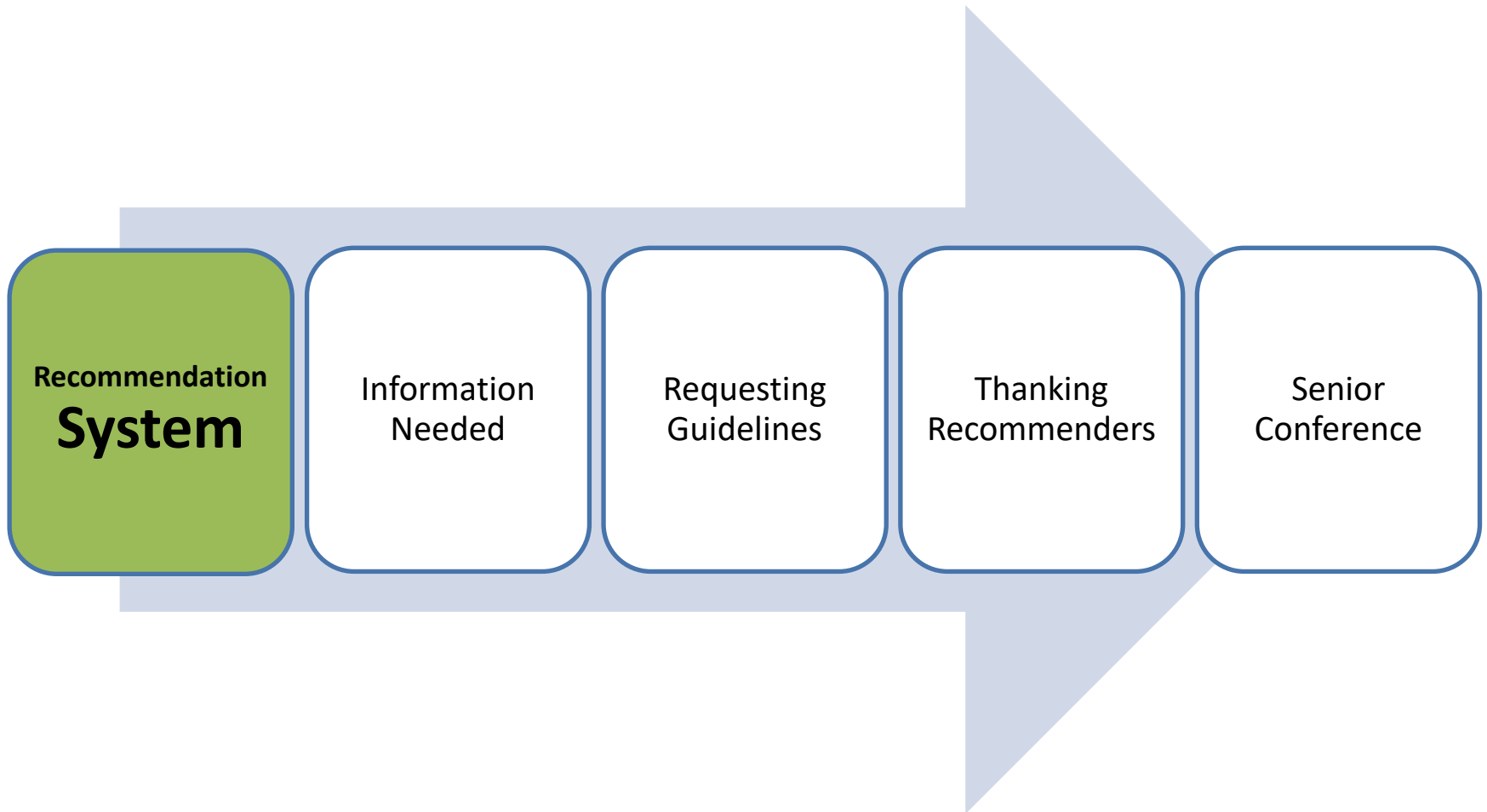
1. Senior Conference
2. Student Information Sheet
3. Parent Brag Sheet
4. Peer Information Sheet
5. Resume

Step 3

Communicate To Students The Recommendation Process

1. How To Request
2. How Long It Takes
3. Thank You Notes

Building A Recommendation Writing System Implementation Steps





Section 4

OVERVIEW RECOMMENDATION COMPONENTS

REMEMBER

Intended Purpose Of Recommendations

The recommendation provides insight into a student's character and potential to thrive at a future postsecondary institution.

The recommendation should bring the student to life for the reader and show context in which to evaluate the student for admission purposes.



The recommendation should highlight a student's strengths and limitations.

FORMAT

**How you
present your
words
matters!**

- 1. One page letters are preferred**
- 2. Use school letter head**

THE SCHOOL PROFILE

The Recommendation should be attached to a SCHOOL PROFILE

The Profile should include:

1. Name and address of school
2. Phone number of counselor
3. Number of Students
4. Grading scale
5. Size of previous graduation class who attended postsecondary schools
6. Counselors signature

Polling Question 7

My school has a profile.

1. Yes
2. No



Section 5

GETTING STARTED STRATEGIES

WRITING OUTLINE

3 – 4
Paragraphs

1 Page

Paragraph 1 - Introduction

Student/Counselor Relationship. Your connection to student. Student Descriptors – Give Examples. Areas of pride.

Paragraph 2

Academic Information – Enhance/Highlight
Focus on a student's strengths and limitations. Provide insight into a student's character and potential to thrive at postsecondary institution. List academic and personal strengths and challenges and how these relate to student's career choice/major.

Paragraph 3 - Closing

Reflection: Did your letter tell a good story?

**Needed
STUDENT INFORMATION**

Where To Begin

Collect Student Information

If you work in a large school or are new to your school, you may have to write letters for students you don't know very well. **Solicit information about students:**

- Have the student complete a self assessment.
- Ask the student's teachers to fill out a teacher information form.
- Ask the student's parent(s) or guardian(s) to complete a parent brag sheet.
- Peer Recommendation

Sample Student Info Questions

1. What are your most challenging classes.
2. What are your easiest classes? What is the best measure of your potential to succeed in college?
3. Are there any circumstances that have affected your academic performance?
4. What personal accomplishments are you most proud of achieving?
5. What do you do in your spare time?
6. What is the last book you read.
7. 3 adjectives to describe yourself. Provide Examples
8. Why do people like /dislike you?
9. Tell me 2 things your friends say about you and why>

Beginning Action Steps

1. Be passionate but not subjective
2. Make each recommendation unique by talking to the student and getting information.
3. Avoid generic letters and phrases.
4. Be brief and concise. – Avoid flowery language.
5. Admissions people have lots to read. Just like you have lots to write.
6. Use present tense and active verbs since the student has not graduated
7. Use at least 2 examples that demonstrates an important aspect of the student's character
8. Check for red flags on the transcript and explain.

Example: Sophomore year the student struggled after a personal tragedy

Opening Paragraph

Develop a strong opening paragraph.

- Opening statement should command attention.
- Move from general to specific information
- Highlight the students academic program?
- Make clear the student/counselor connection.
- Explain qualities that highlight why you think the student will succeed.
- Highlight qualities and skills the student possesses that make them admissible.

Paragraph 2

ACADEMIC INFORMATION

- Describe student in the context of the school and the curriculum they have undertaken.
- State qualities that make the student admissible.
- Tie personal qualities to their career choice
- Explain why you think a student is a good match for a particular college.
- Highlight a few points with in-depth examples.
- Use personal examples (not just adjectives) to highlight the student's qualities.
- **Do not reiterate information already found in transcript or application.**
- Explain how well you know the student (caseload size – new to school – years at school).
- Address attitude and character and academic ability.
- Address growth, if you have known a student over a period of time.
- Determine how you will address negatives
- Explain any unusual circumstances that may have affected the students performance --- within confidentiality guidelines.

?

Closing Paragraph

Closing Statement

Summarize your evaluation and state your support for the student to be admitted.

- Refer back to the ideas in your introduction.
- State any concerns in a positive manner.
- Reinforce what the student can bring to the campus.

“Mary’s abilities, attitudes and intellect leave me no doubt that she will make a significant contribution to the campus community.”



Section 5

Recommendation Writing Strategies Basic Do's and Don'ts

Do

Share - Identify your source of information, if you don't know the student well.

Proof Read - Be sure your pronouns are the same gender as the student.

Attach - Your recommendation letter to the counselor recommendation form, if applicable.

Don't

Restate

Information that is found on the transcript or elsewhere in the application.

Don't use the same phrases across multiple recommendations.

Avoid the boiler plate approach. It devalues your credibility.

Don't

1. Assume the admissions office knows your high school well.
2. Don't repeat information in the school profile
3. Have another school's name on the recommendation!
4. Have another student's name on the application.



Section 6

CLOSING Q AND A

CLOSING Q & A

- Are there times when I should not write a recommendation?
- What if a student is “blah” and bland?
- What can I divulge in a letter of recommendation?
- What if the student does not “waive his rights” to view my letter?
- How do I speak about a student’s weaknesses without hurting his chances for admission?
- Other questions?