THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

Asking for a Recommendation Letter

Educational & Scholarship Pathways · Scholarships & Financial Aid

How a student can ask well, and what to hand the person writing it.

IN THIS GUIDE

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A free guide from My Fairy GodParents — for youth impacted by parental incarceration, justice-impacted youth, and the caregivers and families who support them.
myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint

Print, write on it, and share it with the people helping your family.

Asking for a Recommendation Letter

> *How a student can ask well, and what to hand the person writing it.*

THE DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES

A recommendation letter is the only part of an application written by someone other than the student, which is exactly why committees weigh it. It is also the part most students handle worst — asked too late, of the wrong person, with no information provided.

Students from households in crisis are often convinced no one knows them well enough to write one. Usually that is untrue. The coach, the bus driver who is also a paraprofessional, the manager at the part-time job, the church youth leader — adults who have watched consistency under difficult conditions write the most persuasive letters there are.

This lesson covers who to ask, when to ask, and what to hand them so the letter comes back specific instead of generic.

WHO TO ASK

Ask someone who has seen the student work, not someone with the most impressive title. A teacher who gave a B but watched the student rebuild after a hard semester writes a better letter than a teacher who gave an A to a student they cannot picture.

Most applications want an academic voice plus, sometimes, a second from outside the classroom. Read what the application asks for before choosing — some explicitly exclude relatives, and a letter from a family member usually reads as less credible even when permitted.

If the student truly cannot name anyone, that is a signal to act on rather than a fact to accept. Spending one semester showing up consistently for a club, a job, or a volunteer role solves it, and the same relationship produces the letter next year.

WHEN TO ASK

Three weeks is the minimum; a month or more is better. Teachers write many of these letters in the same weeks, and the ones written last are the ones that read like a form.

Spring of eleventh grade is the ideal moment to make the first request. The teacher has just spent a year

with the student, memory is fresh, and the December crush has not started.

Ask in person or by a direct message rather than through a portal notification. The portal request should be the follow-up to a real conversation, not the first the writer hears of it.

+ WHAT TO HAND THE WRITER

Give a one-page packet: the deadline and how to submit, the award or school description, a list of the student's activities and jobs, and three or four sentences on what the student hopes the letter mentions.

That last item is not presumptuous — writers are grateful for it. 'I'd love it if you could mention the semester I came back after missing three weeks, because it's the thing I'm proudest of' gives a teacher a concrete story to build around.

Decide in advance how much of the family's private circumstances the student wants disclosed, and say so explicitly. A writer who does not know the boundary either overshares or avoids the subject entirely. Neither serves the student.

Follow up once, politely, about a week before the deadline. Then thank the writer afterward and tell them the outcome. That closes the loop and makes the second request, a year later, easy.

+ PROTECTING PRIVACY WHILE TELLING THE TRUTH

Many students want a letter that acknowledges what they have carried without turning their family into the subject. That is entirely achievable, and it is worth naming out loud when making the request.

A useful frame for the writer: describe what you observed in me, not what you know about my household. Reliability, recovery after absence, responsibility for others, work outside school — all of it can be described without naming an incarceration.

If a student does want the circumstances named, one plain sentence is enough. Committees do not need detail; they need context for the pattern they are seeing in the transcript.

+ THE MANAGER WHO WROTE THE STRONGEST LETTER

A senior applying to three schools and two scholarships had a mixed transcript and assumed no teacher would say much about him. His counselor asked a different question: who has watched you show up when it was hard?

The answer was his shift manager at a grocery store, where he had worked eighteen months of closing shifts and had never once called out — including the month his mother was arrested. He asked her in September with a one-page packet and a note that read: I'd rather you talk about my work than my family, but you can say my home situation changed and I kept my shifts.

Her letter described a seventeen-year-old training new hires at the register and reorganizing the closing routine so the team could leave twenty minutes earlier. It was the most concrete document in his file. Two of the three schools admitted him.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

Asking in person

Say this, then follow up with the packet by email.

"Do you have two minutes? I'm applying to [schools/scholarships] and I'd be grateful if you'd write me a recommendation letter. The deadline is [date]. I'll send you a one-page summary with everything you'd need. If you're too stretched, please just tell me — I'd rather ask someone else than have you rushed."

The packet email

Send within a day of asking.

"Thank you again for agreeing to write for me. Here's everything in one place: Deadline: [date] · Submit to: [link or address] Applying for: [school or award, one line on what it's for] Activities and work: [3-4 bullets] If it's useful, the things I'm proudest of this year are [two specifics]. Please describe what you've seen in my work rather than my family situation — you're welcome to say my home circumstances changed and I kept going, but I'd rather not have the details in the letter."

Polite follow-up

About a week before the deadline.

"Hi [Name] — just a friendly check-in on the recommendation letter, since the deadline is [date]. No pressure at all, and let me know if you need anything else from me."

Thank-you and outcome

After the decision, win or lose.

"I wanted to thank you for writing for me, and to let you know that [outcome]. Your letter mattered, and I appreciate the time it took. I'll keep you posted on how things go."

+ YOUR RECOMMENDATION-LETTER PLAN

- [ ] List three adults who have watched you work, not just watched you.
- [ ] Check whether the application excludes relatives or requires an academic writer.
- [ ] Ask at least three weeks out — spring of junior year for the first one.
- [ ] Ask in person or by direct message before any portal request.
- [ ] Send a one-page packet: deadline, description, activities, what to mention.
- [ ] State clearly what you do and don't want disclosed about home.

- [ ] Follow up once, a week before the deadline.
- [ ] Thank the writer and tell them the outcome.

REFLECT AND WRITE

Who has watched me show up when it was hard?

What is the one story I'd want a letter to include?

What do I not want written about my family, and how will I say so?

YOUR NEXT STEP

> Name two adults who have seen your work and could speak to it.

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Written by My Fairy GodParents — reviewed August 2026.

This is general information and practice guidance — not legal advice, mental-health treatment, or a statement of any court, agency, or facility's rules. Policies differ by state, county, facility, school, and program, so always confirm details with the office involved.

For decisions with legal, medical, financial, or clinical consequences, work with a licensed professional or the organizations listed with each resource.

You do not have to do this alone.

More free guides, scripts, and checklists:
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