Recommender Advice

Writing a recommendation may seem like a straightforward task, but it can be surprisingly challenging! We hope the below tips and examples will be helpful to you as you prepare to write your recommendation.

About the process
- Most of the recommender questions overlap between schools
- Typically, recommendations take between ˜3-5 hours in total by the time someone is done with them all
- Deadlines begin as early as September 7th

Top tips for recommenders

1. Gather the information you need before you start writing
A candidate should provide you with his or her resume, drafts of essays, lists of accomplishments, and a document highlighting application themes. If you need any additional information, you should absolutely ask for it before you begin.

2. Read the directions
Different schools have different approaches – some want you to answer specific questions, while others request a general letter highlighting a candidate's different attributes. Some schools also ask multiple questions within a question; please ensure that you answer each part.

3. Be enthusiastic
A recommendation is very different from a company review/evaluation that is, by its nature, balanced in its recognition of strengths and areas for development. A strong recommendation offers sincere and complete support for the candidate – don't hold back in describing how wonderful this person is and why you believe she would be a good addition to a program.

4. Provide simple background context
While the application readers will be familiar with a candidate's background, they may not know the nuances of your work environment. Practically, this means several things for your recommendation:
- Explain the candidate's title and promotions that led to that title, if relevant.
- Avoid industry-specific acronyms and terminology; as a rule of thumb, try to steer clear of anything that a high school student wouldn't understand.
- Share context for your interactions, from how regularly you worked with the candidate during the most intense period and what type of contact you have today. Include how long you have known the person (and how long you worked together if that number is different).
- If you know others who have interacted with the candidate, it is helpful to share that context as well, particularly if they share your perspective on the candidate's strengths.

5. Be familiar with candidate's main themes
The best recommendations not only offer a broad range of stories, they also align with the core themes that the candidate is attempting to project.

In particular, you should know what a candidate is sharing in the essays about future goals and attempt to make specific connections between the person's strengths and her ability to achieve specific goals. Examples of past goals:
- Building a Private Equity career, eventually transitioning into politics
- Commercializing devices that predict heart attacks sooner

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- Becoming an operational leader in a major consulting firm
- Being elected mayor of a big city

6. Plan to share specific stories

If you do not remember details from a particular event or project, it is certainly reasonable to ask the candidate for a reminder!

- Give examples of excellence – conducting analysis, working with clients, supporting someone else on the team, moving the organization to action, going above and beyond, etc. Tell a story or two. Examples are your evidence or "proof points" of what you are saying.
- Make sure level of responsibility is clear. Consider how your recommendation might read next to a recommendation for someone with the same tenure in an organization that doesn't give as much responsibility to junior people.

7. Provide a connection between the candidate's goals and the MBA program

This is especially critical if you went to the school in question yourself.

Try to provide examples of one or more of the following:

- Contributions the person will make in the **classroom** (e.g., subject matter expertise, environments she has flourished in);
- Types of **extra-curricular activities** that he will thrive in (e.g., organizing large events, facilitating group discussions, participating in competitions);
- The **personality** that someone will bring to campus overall (e.g., a person who negotiates effectively on behalf of groups, finds ways to engage a quiet outsider, builds enthusiasm within a group to try new things).

8. Know and respect the word limits

Attempt to **stay close to the word limits**: 10% above is reasonable, 50% above is excessive. Similarly, try not to come in well below the recommended limit: overly short responses can convey a lack of interest.

9. Be prepared to compare the candidate

When and if you are asked to **compare candidates**, pick a group that is relevant for business school and a group where the comparison is favorable. You could compare the candidate to others in the same position, people several years further along in their careers, or your own business school classmates. *Remember, almost every recommendation letter says that the candidate is great. A good recommendation says that the candidate is **better than** other candidates, and why.*

For example:

- If he received a rare promotion, explain the rarity (e.g., at most one candidate each year receives this promotion, while more than ## people are eligible).
- Explain that the role had more responsibility attached to it than most jobs held by people her age have (if applicable).

Note: Do not rely on the checkboxes on the form. A large majority of recommendations use only the top two boxes, which means that marking those boxes won't necessarily indicate that you believe the candidate is truly exceptional.

10. Remember that schools are looking for OUTSTANDING candidates

Communicate what it is that makes this candidate exceptional and destined to do something truly differentiated.

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Frequently asked questions

What if I'm uncertain how strongly I can recommend the candidate?
If you have been asked to write a recommendation and you are not prepared to strongly endorse the candidate, we encourage you to be honest with him or her and encourage the selection of a different recommender. An average recommendation will make it almost impossible for a candidate to succeed.

How should I fill out the checklist chart?
Be honest. If the candidate is truly outstanding on all dimensions, you should feel comfortable sharing that. Equally, it will not hurt the candidate's chances to indicate that they have areas for improvement.

Recommendation Examples

Context
- **Weak example:** I have worked with [Name] ever since she joined our firm. She is a very strong contributor on a number of dimensions, from team work to analytics and relationships with clients.
- **Strong example:** I have known [Name] for three years. After she was on my team for [project], I subsequently sought her out for every team I led until I left [firm]. I continue to mentor her, interacting with her weekly.

Teamwork example
- **Weak example:** [Name] is a very strong team member. She has an incredibly positive attitude and is willing to contribute however we need her to, going above and beyond to do things that we would never have expected.
- **Strong example:** [Name] is someone you actively seek to invest in: she sets remarkable goals for herself and succeeds through innate capability, hard work, and her desire to lead. During her first year at [firm], [Name] was on a challenging case with low sustainability and team scores. Rather than complain, [Name] sought opportunities to reverse the trend, communicating the team's upward feedback to management and coordinating a team workout challenge to boost morale. Her efforts were successful and resulted in a quick turnaround of the team's experience. As the most junior member, she set a positive tone for everyone else.

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Weakness example

- **Weak example:** [Name] has been above her class most of the time that she has been at [firm], so it can be hard to pinpoint a weakness! If I had to, though, I would say that she could learn to delegate a little more.
- **Strong example:** In her first month at [firm], [Name] came to me with a great skill plan. The problem was, it was two pages long and included many "stretch" goals more appropriate for a third-year analyst (e.g., take full ownership of the entire workstream, including key client relationships). While it was clear [Name] was open to feedback and wanted to be a strong contributor, she needed to understand that she couldn't achieve EVERYTHING on her first case. I emphasized that she should focus on one or two development areas at a time, achieving each goal before moving forward. [Name] responded with incredible enthusiasm and appreciation, returning later that day with simplified goals, summarizing her objective in one statement: "greatly exceed the expectations for a first-year analyst". Her new goals conveyed her passion and telegraphed the trajectory she was about to achieve.

Example of remaining positive

- **Weak example:** Despite the fact that his project was behind schedule, [Name] always managed to rally his team members and increase morale.

- **Strong example:** I have given this feedback to many direct reports and sometimes, it's met with confusion or frustration. [Name's] reaction was to embrace the ownership I gave him and schedule check-ins to go over clear agendas and goals. He came prepared with alternatives and reasoning I could share with our leadership team.

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