

TEACHER RECOMMENDATIONS AND YOU

Or how I learned to love the recommendation

Daniel Grayson

The Establishment of Advocacy

The Role of the Teacher Rec

- Outside Assessment
- Personal Perspective
- Insight into intellectualism
- Differentiation within a classroom

Do:

- Write like a human being talking to another human being
- Make your students **DISTINCTIVE**.
- Offer your personal reflections
 - Stick to what you know or have experienced
 - Tell us you love them (if you love them)
- Be anecdotal
- Be honest
- Stress quality over quantity
- Say no, judiciously

Don't:

- Narrate your syllabus
- List your own accomplishments
- List grades received, other courses taken
- List activities where you have no personal insight to add
- Fill a page just to fill a page
- Copy/paste your letters (I hope this bullet is unnecessary)

The importance of Adjectives:

HIGHLY SELECTIVE ONLY:

- Good, solid, meticulous, polite, hard working, nice, conscientious, earnest, reserved, respectful, shy, always on time, attentive, well-behaved, fine, diligent, quiet, consistent.
- **These are all fine adjectives that communicate reliable qualities.** But “Reliable” and “Fine” will not get a student in when the admit rate is 1 in 8.

Sample Letters:

To Whom it may concern,

I am delighted to have been asked by my student, Patrick August Q. Harbinger, to write this letter of recommendation for him. This extraordinarily hard-working and brilliant young man took both the rigorous, mathematically-challenging Honors Physics course last year as a junior with me, and then elected to take the even more challenging Advanced Placement Physics with Calculus course this year as senior. We only offer the AP Mechanics course currently at this school, which is taught as a single period that finishes up in April rather than a double period that finishes in December. August has clearly chosen an academic path to better prepare himself for his chosen course of study in engineering.

August's drive to know all he can and challenge himself in preparation for life is clearly shown on his remarkable transcript. By the end of this year, August will have completed eight Advanced Placement courses, two courses in calculus and three engineering classes. He will leave high school with over 24 college credits and recognition by the College Board as an AP Scholar with Distinction. He has also received a Letter of Commendation from the National Merit Scholarship Program for his outstanding performance on the Student Achievement Tests given last year. Clearly this is a young man motivated to achieve at the highest level of academic proficiency possible.

As if August's involvement in his studies has not been enough, this energetic go-getter has immersed himself in a number of activities that complement his focus on all things engineering. One of the things he seems to be most proud of is his involvement as a co-team captain of the school's award-winning FIRST Robotics Club, which placed second regionally last year out of 64 entries with their entry designed to climb a tower and launch disks that had to hit a target while dodging other teams' efforts to destroy or block them. August worked on the electrical system and high level design problems of the robot for last year's device. As a project for an engineering class he is taking this year, August is currently working with two other students to investigate the feasibility of and possibly develop plans for a hardware-based truly random number generator. This past summer, August obtained a coveted internship at the Autonomous Robotics and Perception Lab at Millard Fillmore University. While at the lab, August worked on "path-finding", which is figuring out the shortest path between two points in a maze. His involvement with all of these activities is clearly an outcome of his interest in his professed career choice of engineering.

This engaging and interesting young man has a plethora of additional accomplishments that round out his persona and experiences. August attained the top rank of Eagle Scout in the Boy Scouts of America two years ago, with a

community service project of renovating a dilapidated seating ring in an amphitheater at a local park. He loves the outdoors and has done extensive hiking throughout the region locally as well as in New Mexico, where he participated in a 60-mile, ten-day hike, sleeping in a tent that he backpacked into the area. August has extensive travel experience, including a trip to Ravenna, Italy where he spent two weeks out of a five week program called The Experiment in International Living with an Italian family. He has remained in close contact with the family via Skype since then, and his host "brother" has visited the United States to stay with August and explore in return. August is an accomplished photographer who has developed his skill and eye over the past four years and whose intriguing photos are regularly displayed at the school's amazing annual art show and online at www.photos.augustharbinger.com. This talented young man is also a valued member of the school's competitive Cross Country Team which usually makes it to the state competitions and a member of the Track Team. Last year, August finished ninth at the 4A West Regional Championship in the 400 meter dash event, and he looks to improve his performance this year.

I hope I have managed to give a balanced and insightful picture of this truly impressive young man's accomplishments and obvious potential for being a major contributor to the field of engineering, potentially and specifically robotics and cyber-security engineering. August Harbinger clearly has amply demonstrated the intellectual capacity, the academic study skills, the energy, drive, and the social conscience and social skills to succeed at pretty much whatever he chooses to focus his attention on. I am heartened that he has chosen a science-related field to bestow with his gifts.

As such, I recommend August Q. Harbinger to you with my highest regard and greatest esteem for consideration as a candidate to attend your university. I have no reservations about his ability to fit in, his ability to achieve at the highest level, and his ability to impress you as he has me.

Sincerely,

Slim Shady

Physics Teacher

What worked?

- I learned about August's intellectual interests in robotics and cyber security
- I learned August is an “energetic go-getter”
- I learned that August takes particular delight in problem solving and that he enjoys tangible tasks with reality-based outcomes.
- I learned that August is rounded beyond those interests (he doesn't have to be, but that's what I learned)

What was missing?

- Insight into August in class
- Personal reflection

What was unhelpful?

- The length
- Resume rehash, both academic and extracurricular

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The first meaningful conversation I shared with Matthew piqued my interest in him as a person and student. We never had an opportunity for any meaningful dialogue until we were working together with a couple of dozen service club members sorting and pricing rummage in the dank, dirty, non—air— conditioned basement of our school at the end of his sophomore year.

Among the random items in a donated box was Henry Kissinger's award winning history, *ON CHINA*. Immediately Matthew asked if he could purchase it. I asked if he wanted it as a gift for his father. He seemed puzzled by my question and explained that he had read reviews of the book and wanted to read it during summer vacation. I then asked Matthew what history class he has selected for his junior year. He planned on AP US history. I told him he might be “stuck” in my class!!

Much to my good fortune, when I later checked my class roll, Matthew's name was included. On the first day, as he entered our room, I asked if he had read Kissinger. He was enthusiastic about his new knowledge and understanding. We later had quite an interesting discussion about the book.

During my time teaching talented students at my school, few have ever asked for any book the caliber of *ON CHINA* for personal, non-assigned reading. As I observed Matthew, it was evident that he loves learning for learning's sake; unlike a large number of students on our campus who are driven by GPA's, Matthew relishes exploring ideas and tries to budget time for personal reading. His enthusiasm for life is also infectious.

Matthew strives to understand topics in greater depth than most of his peers. His probing questions in class, combined with insightful and perceptive comments, raised the level of class discussions. His classmates and I always valued his intellectual curiosity.

Matthew has an intrinsic interest in current events, including those in Taiwan, the United States, and internationally. He especially enjoys relating the history he knows to the present day events. He also relates history to other disciplines.

Although Matthew initially found the multiple choice section of our tests challenging, he became a focused reader and skillful objective test-taker.

During the year, Matthew's essays improved substantially; his succinct, organized, and comprehensive answers were also always interesting. Matthew was receptive to my suggestions for improvement. He continually strived to improve and do his best. The results were some of the best compositions I read by May.

Matthew is a dedicated Service Club member who assists at rummage sales from 6:30 AM until the final clean up after 9:30 PM. I especially like the way Matthew bonds with young boys at the two orphanages from where we take children for monthly Saturday and Sunday outings. Matthew is like the “Pied Piper.” As soon as we arrive at the orphanage, many young boys run to grab his hand, “hi five him,” or beg to accompany him. Actually he has had the same boy for the past three years. He really thinks of Matthew as a “big brother.”

I recommend Matthew most enthusiastically to a rigorous academic program confident that he will excel. He will also enrich his new campus with his integrity, intellectual prowess, positive attitude, and humor. I will miss Matthew next year, but know that I will learn of how he is improving our world.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeremy Bentham

History Department

Orphanage Club Sponsor

What works?

- You will get a sense of Matthew as a whole person, and that insight will be framed by this teacher's personal reflections and qualitative judgments/opinions.
- You will be given insight into not only what Matthew's intellectual interests are, but also how he pursues them.
- Anecdotes will be used to demonstrate personal and intellectual qualities and to give weight to already asserted qualities
- Context will be used to magnify qualitative judgments

Questions?