Several of you have asked us to give the “our-side-of-the-desk” view on recommendation letters. That sounds easy enough. After all, we’ve read thousands of them and have a pretty good idea of what works and what doesn’t. The problem is that every draft of this column has read as if we think we know how to do your job better than you do, which certainly isn’t the case!

Still, in our never-ending attempt to make this newsletter both useful and playful (read: not simply a Hamilton “commercial”), and at the risk of offending those of you who haven’t asked for our advice on this topic, we’ve decided to go for it. We hope the following 10 tips are helpful!

1. DON’T let your recommendation letter exceed one typed page. Okay, if you can’t help yourself, one-and-a-half pages will do, but only if the student is exceptional. Even extra paragraphs won’t make the unexceptional sound exceptional.

2. DO take the opportunity to explain the nuances of your curriculum that won’t be obvious to us (e.g., lack of AP courses available, scheduling conflicts that limit options or rigor for students, etc.).

3. DON’T cut and paste excerpts from a recommendation letter for one student to the letter for another. (We never hold this against the student, by the way. But, then again, it isn’t helping him or her either.)

4. DO take the time to tell us things we wouldn’t learn elsewhere in the student’s application.

5. DON’T paraphrase all of the student’s teachers’ comments (remember, we require teacher recommendations, too). Reserve those callouts for the extraordinary testimonials.

6. DO explain your grading scale by providing us with context. This is especially important for schools that don’t rank, calculate deciles or provide school profiles. Knowing that you have a particularly strong graduating class (with examples to back that up) can be helpful as well.

7. DON’T send a letter to Hamilton telling us all the reasons why the student would be fabulous at Middlebury. Enough said.

8. DO provide perspective if there is a tough course or teacher at your school. Of course a student’s entire body of academic work will carry the day in most admission committees and decisions, but especially at highly selective colleges, one low-ish grade can make us pause. In such cases, it would be helpful to know if it really isn’t a low-ish grade.


10. DO pick up the phone and call us if there is something you think we should know (good or bad) that you are not comfortable putting in writing.

FINALLY, above all else, know that we read your recommendation letters. This requirement is not just another arduous hoop we make you and your students jump through to no avail. To be sure, the single most important factor in our decision-making process is the high school transcript. But your comments and insight provide us with perspective and help us assess fit with our community. While we recognize that counselor workloads are not getting smaller and that you might not know all of your students (rest assured we won’t hold it against candidates in those latter cases), if and when you know a student well, your letter can be — and often is — the difference-maker that will get a student a closer look in our process.