

ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

The Brag Sheet Fix: How to Help Your Child Earn a More Compelling Teacher Recommendation



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A student can win academic awards, earn excellent grades, and fill an entire page with extracurricular accomplishments—and still give a teacher very little to say in a college recommendation.

The problem is not that the student lacks achievements. It is that a list of achievements does not necessarily reveal how the student thinks.

A teacher who remembers a student's grades may be able to describe academic performance. A teacher who remembers the student challenging an assumption, revising an argument after a class debate, or finding an unexpected solution to a difficult problem can describe something more personal: the student behind the transcript.

That distinction matters. MIT Admissions explicitly advises recommenders to make their letters specific and story-driven, using facts and anecdotes to explain their impressions. The College Board similarly recommends that teachers draw on particular interactions and examples of student work rather than rely on generic descriptions.

A well-prepared brag sheet can help teachers recover those details. It cannot guarantee a glowing letter, but it can make writing a specific, accurate, memorable recommendation substantially easier.

WHY THE TRADITIONAL BRAG SHEET OFTEN FALLS SHORT

Many students approach the brag sheet as another résumé. They list honor societies, leadership positions, awards, volunteer hours, advanced courses, and intended majors.

These facts have their place. They help a teacher understand a student's interests and accomplishments outside the classroom. But they do not necessarily answer the questions that make a teacher recommendation distinctive:

How does this student approach an unfamiliar problem?

What happens when the student encounters an argument they disagree with?

Does the student ask questions that deepen the discussion?

How does the student respond to criticism or an incorrect answer?

WHAT CONTRIBUTION DOES THE STUDENT MAKE TO THE LEARNING OF OTHERS?

A résumé might tell a teacher that a student won a debate tournament. A useful brag sheet might remind the teacher that, during a classroom discussion, the student abandoned an initially persuasive argument after recognizing that the opposing side had stronger evidence.

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The second detail gives the teacher a story about intellectual honesty and analytical flexibility. If the teacher witnessed the exchange, the teacher can describe it in their own words and explain why it mattered.

That is the central principle: the brag sheet should help the teacher remember the student in action, not merely remember the student's accomplishments.

WHAT ADMISSIONS READERS CAN LEARN FROM SPECIFIC EVIDENCE

Teacher recommendations serve a different purpose from transcripts and activity lists. Grades show academic performance; activities show involvement and accomplishments. A teacher's firsthand account can add context about intellectual habits, classroom participation, and personal qualities.

The College Board identifies classroom contribution, intellectual challenge, and original projects as useful subjects for recommendations. MIT asks recommenders to consider intellectual risk-taking, motivation, interactions with peers, responses to disappointment, and the qualities they will remember most about the student.

These are not universal admissions criteria or a secret checklist every college uses. They are examples of the kinds of information a recommendation can communicate beyond grades alone.

Consider the difference between these two descriptions.

Generic: "She is an excellent student who works hard and participates in class."

Evidence-based: "During our unit on environmental policy, she questioned whether the data supported the conclusion in our assigned article. She compared the author's evidence with a second source, then revised her own position when the comparison complicated her original argument."

The second description is useful only if the teacher genuinely observed the behavior and can support the account. But when it is accurate, it shows the student doing something that a grade cannot fully communicate: evaluating evidence, testing an interpretation, and responding to new information.

The goal is not to manufacture a dramatic anecdote. It is to recover a real one.

THE FIVE DETAILS EVERY STRONG BRAG SHEET SHOULD HELP SURFACE

Instead of asking students to write another miniature résumé, use the following prompts to recover classroom memories.

1. THE ANALYTICAL BREAKTHROUGH

Ask: What is one difficult question, concept, or assignment that changed how you approached a subject?

The answer should identify the problem, the student's response, and what changed.

Weak answer: "I enjoyed analyzing literature because I like English."

Stronger answer: "In our analysis of Macbeth, I initially treated Macbeth's ambition as the main explanation for his choices. When I compared his private doubts with his public speeches, I began to question whether fear and political pressure explained more than ambition alone."

This gives a literature teacher a potential reminder of the student's interpretive process. The teacher should decide whether the example matches their own observations and is worth including.

2. THE PAPER THAT REVEALS HOW THE STUDENT THINKS

ASK: WHICH PAPER OR PROJECT BEST REPRESENTS YOUR THINKING, AND WHAT MADE IT DIFFICULT?

Students should identify the topic, the intellectual challenge, and a meaningful revision or discovery.

For example:

"I wrote a history paper comparing two explanations for the same political event. My first draft summarized both interpretations, but my teacher's feedback made me realize that I had not evaluated the evidence. I reorganized the paper around the disagreement between the sources and explained why one interpretation was more convincing."

The point is not to praise revision as an automatic virtue. It is to explain what the student actually reconsidered and how the work improved.

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If the teacher remembers the paper, the student's notes may help the teacher connect a specific assignment to a broader impression of the student's analytical development.

3. THE CLASSROOM DEBATE THAT REVEALS INTELLECTUAL CHARACTER

Ask: Describe a discussion in which you changed your mind, challenged an assumption, or helped the class examine a question more carefully.

A useful response includes the question being discussed, the student's contribution, and the reasoning behind it.

For example:

"During a discussion about whether a character acted out of loyalty or self-interest, I argued for loyalty. Another student pointed out that the character's actions also benefited him personally. I reconsidered my interpretation and suggested that the character's motives might be mixed rather than mutually exclusive."

This is more informative than saying, "I participate frequently." It gives the teacher a concrete situation in which to recall how the student engaged with competing interpretations.

Students should not invent a debate or exaggerate their role in one. A small, accurate contribution is more useful than an impressive-sounding story the teacher cannot recognize.

4. THE PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS BEHIND A CORRECT ANSWER

ASK: WHEN DID YOU STRUGGLE WITH A DIFFICULT PROBLEM, AND WHAT DID YOU TRY BEFORE REACHING A SOLUTION?

This prompt is especially useful for mathematics, science, economics, computer science, and other subjects where the final answer may conceal the reasoning that produced it.

For example:

"I could solve a physics problem when the relevant formula was obvious, but I struggled when the problem required choosing the model myself. I started drawing diagrams, listing known quantities, and explaining why each equation applied before calculating. That process helped me identify mistakes earlier."

A teacher may remember a similar pattern in the student's work. If so, the brag sheet can help the teacher describe persistence, independent reasoning, or a developing command of the subject with specific evidence.

The strongest examples do not pretend that every difficulty became an extraordinary success. Sometimes the meaningful detail is the student's willingness to test a new approach, ask a precise question, or recognize a mistaken assumption.

5. THE CONTRIBUTION OTHER STUDENTS EXPERIENCED

ASK: WHEN DID YOUR ACTIONS HELP ANOTHER STUDENT OR IMPROVE A CLASS DISCUSSION, PROJECT, OR GROUP ASSIGNMENT?

Leadership does not always mean holding an elected position. It can involve explaining a difficult concept, asking a question that helps classmates understand an issue, or organizing a group's reasoning when a project becomes confusing.

For example:

"During our group lab, we had conflicting measurements and initially assumed someone had made a calculation error. I suggested that we compare our procedures before repeating the experiment. We discovered that we had recorded measurements at different intervals, which explained part of the discrepancy."

If the teacher witnessed the exchange, the example may provide evidence of collaboration and practical problem-solving. It is stronger than merely reporting that the student was a group leader.

THE BRAG SHEET TEMPLATE PARENTS CAN USE

A useful brag sheet is concise, factual, and easy to scan. It should not become a long document that the teacher must decipher.

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For each of two or three meaningful classroom experiences, have the student complete the following:

- Course and assignment: What class, paper, discussion, or project was involved?
- The challenge: What question, disagreement, mistake, or obstacle made the work difficult?
- My response: What did I actually say, test, revise, investigate, or change?
- What I learned: Did my interpretation, method, or understanding change? How?
- What the teacher may remember: What part of this experience did the teacher directly observe?
- Supporting material: Is there a paper, project, or teacher comment that could help refresh the memory?

Students should also provide a short overview of their current academic interests, intended field of study if known, relevant activities, and application deadlines. The College Board recommends giving teachers information about the student's goals and interactions, as well as examples of the student's work.

The classroom examples should receive the most attention. Awards and activities can remain in a short supplementary section.

WHAT PARENTS SHOULD—AND SHOULD NOT—DO

Parents can help their children recall experiences they might otherwise overlook. They can ask about a memorable assignment, a difficult classroom question, or feedback that changed how the student approached a subject.

But parents should not write the student's answers for them, invent polished anecdotes, or instruct the teacher to use particular adjectives. The student's account should sound like the student, and the teacher must remain free to form an independent judgment.

A useful prompt is: "What is something you did in class that you wish your teacher remembered?"

A less useful prompt is: "How can we make your teacher describe you as an exceptional intellectual leader?"

The first invites reflection. The second encourages performance.

Teachers also need room to decide which details matter. A brag sheet is a memory aid, not a script or a request for a particular evaluation. If a teacher does not remember an event, the student should not pressure the teacher to present it as firsthand observation.

Timing matters, too. Ask early, follow the school's procedures, provide the requested materials in an organized format, and communicate deadlines clearly. A thoughtful document delivered with sufficient time is more useful than an elaborate packet arriving immediately before the application deadline.

HOW SCHOLAR COACH HELPS STUDENTS BUILD BETTER BRAG SHEETS

Scholar Coach helps students turn scattered academic experiences into a clear record of their thinking and development—not a manufactured admissions persona.

Identify meaningful classroom moments. We help students revisit challenging assignments, discussions, projects, and feedback to find examples that reveal how they approach ideas and problems.

Develop specific, reflective answers. Students learn to explain the challenge, their response, and what changed, rather than relying on generic statements such as "I am passionate about learning."

Connect evidence across subjects. When appropriate, we help students recognize recurring patterns in their work—such as testing assumptions, revising arguments, or approaching unfamiliar problems—without forcing every experience into a predetermined narrative.

Prepare concise materials for recommenders. Students organize classroom examples, relevant work samples, academic interests, and deadlines into a document a busy teacher can use efficiently.

Preserve the teacher's independent voice. We help students provide useful context without scripting recommendations, exaggerating accomplishments, or asking teachers to endorse claims they cannot support.

The most effective brag sheet does not tell a teacher how extraordinary a student is supposed to be. It helps the teacher remember what the student actually did.

That is the fix: fewer disconnected accomplishments, more specific classroom evidence, and enough context for a teacher to write honestly about the person behind the

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grades.

College Board: Tips for Writing Student Recommendations—Teachers
College Board: Tips for Writing Student Recommendations—Counselors
MIT Admissions: Letters of Recommendation

SOURCES

MIT Admissions: How to Write Good Letters of Recommendation

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