



Reference Letters: What To Do?

A Reprint of "A View from the Podium" (2012, 2015) by Paul Fox

If you are requesting a letter of recommendation from any teaching staff member, administrator, minister, coach, or activity sponsor for college entrance, scholarships, awards, or job placement, please follow the instructions of your school counselor AND review/complete the steps below. (Items in red are specific to the South Hills Junior Orchestra.)

Do you have an updated "me-file" on your computer's desktop? Maintain a bulleted list of accomplishments with dates. Scan archives of awards, programs, commendations, special honors, and significant assessments. This will become the basis for the creation of résumés or portfolios, and background for your college or employment essays.

In person, ask the teacher from whom you want the letter if he/she is willing to do this. This should be an adult in whom you have a great deal of trust and with whom you have had frequent contact. If you have any doubt or misgivings like "Does this professional like me?" or "Will he/she give me a fair rating?" – then you should ask someone else. **If you are a current member of SHJO, anyone asking Mr. Fox should have no fear. He will tell you immediately if there is any problem in writing a positive letter.**

In my opinion, if you choose the right person to do your letter, you can sign-off your rights to see it before submission to the institution. A student checking "yes" to waiving his/her access to/examination of the reference may look better to the evaluator. Although not required, some may send you a copy of it for your files. **That is my standard practice.**

Know your deadlines. **BY WHEN** do you need the reference letters or common app teacher recommendations?

As a courtesy to the writer (and modeling good preparation on your part), give at least two to three weeks' notice (more is better). Remember: "Lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on the teacher's part." It would also be polite to "gently remind" the staff member about the final deadline of the recommendation (at least one weekend's notice). **For SHJO, one Saturday ahead of the final deadline would be ideal.**

Unless it is an online application or digital reference, the individual requesting the recommendation should provide in advance a pre-stamped self-addressed envelope to be signed, sealed, and mailed directly to any school or organization.

To facilitate "anecdotal references" and confirm accurate data/details, email a mini-résumé of your achievements, particularly those things that can be mentioned in the letter. Try to complete as many of these as possible:

1. When did you first begin your musical (or other academic specialty) study? **When did you join SHJO?**
2. What classes, ensembles, and/or productions have you participated at school?
3. What music or academic leadership positions have you served (give specific dates)?
4. What are your outside activities?
5. What have you done as community service?
6. How are you unique? Describe yourself in three to five words.
7. What qualities or strengths have you exhibited that the staff member, from working with you, could corroborate in the letter?



Can you remember any funny or significant class or rehearsal anecdote that demonstrated growth in your musical technique, expressiveness, student leadership, "team" or ensemble building, or the 21st Century learning skills of creativity, communications, critical thinking, collaboration, and global understanding?

What is your planned major or minor in college, and how did your association with the staff member (his/her classes or activities) help you gain the experience, insight, or confidence to go into this field?