

HOW TO MAKE COLLEGES WANT YOU

Insider Secrets for Tipping the
Admissions Odds in Your Favor

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Bonus Chapter A

THE STRANGER

The right reference can be the un-sung hero of your college application. Unless you are a top student or a top athlete or a top something else, you may find it difficult to find a reference that can have a positive impact on your application. Even with good coaching, your references may not really add much value to your application.

Conventional wisdom would dictate that you choose a reference who really knows you well. Most kids choose teachers, coaches, clergy, or someone they think is important like their dad's business partner. In fact, colleges often require that you include a teacher reference. The idea is that if the person knows you well they can speak to your strengths. The problem is, they can also speak to your weaknesses. While most people won't outwardly bash you on a recommendation form, if they have any negative feelings about you it will be difficult to suppress them. In addition to the usual suspects, however, there is another person you can ask that will help boost your chances of getting in: a stranger.

The idea behind asking a stranger to write a reference for you is that even though they may not know you, you can pick someone who knows the college that you are trying to get into. A stranger who knows your target college well can give you the inside scoop on what it's like to go there. Tell you who the influential people are and perhaps make a few introductions for you that can really make the difference. Better yet, you will have the opportunity to make a positive first impression on them and they won't have the baggage of potentially negative experiences with you.

When I applied to Northwestern, I used this strategy by asking one of my professors that had been a member of the faculty at Northwestern. I took an advertising class from him, but it was a lecture class and he didn't know me. I got a C+ in the class. (I did manage to smooth-talk him into changing it to a B-, however). I stopped by his office one day to ask him if he would write me a recommendation. He looked at me like I was crazy and said "no."

However, I convinced him to set up a time with me to go over who I was, what I was up to, and why I wanted to attend Northwestern. I brought in my class project and reviewed it with him. At the end of the meeting he was impressed enough to write me a recommendation saying that I had "potential." At the end of the day what did he really have to lose by helping me out? He was probably flattered that I asked and impressed by my initiative.

A few weeks later I stopped by his office to thank him again for the recommendation. (I had already sent a thank-you note.) I asked him if he knew anyone in the admissions office or on the staff he could call. I was making a trip to visit Northwestern and I wanted to meet some people. He made a call on my behalf to a friend of his who was one of the professors in the program. I wound up spending the afternoon at the professors' consulting company meeting with some former students. They all contacted the admissions office on my behalf. I got in.

When I asked a stranger I had to have enough confidence in myself to approach him and "sell" myself to him as a good prospect for Northwestern. When I speak to college admissions directors and deans about this concept they are usually skeptical. After all, they often recommend students choose a teacher. However, upon reflection they understand it to be a very powerful strategy. From their perspective, a recommendation from a college "insider" will have a much more meaningful impact. Additionally, they recognize that it takes initiative and courage for a teenager to reach out to a perfect stranger and ask them for help. This simple act shows maturity and leadership. Admissions counselors love this kind of thing.

Choose references that can help you get noticed. If you are really on the ball, you will choose different references for each college you apply to. Sometimes your uncle's best-friend's business partner who went to the college where you want to attend would be willing to spend a few minutes getting to know you and provide a better reference than your church's pastor who knew you since you were a baby. Work your connections; find people who can help influence the process. Find people who know the college, have worked for the college, are huge fans of the college or have donated lots of money to the college.

A great way to find strangers is to call your target college's alumni department and ask for some names of alumni in your area. Tell them that you are interested in their college and that you want to speak to some alumni to learn more. Be sure to tell them your name and contact information as they may pass it onto the admissions department.

Most colleges maintain lists of friendly alumni and most of them will be happy to meet with you. When you get the names call them up and introduce yourself. Here is how the conversation might go:

Mike:	Hi, my name is Mike Moyer. I got your name from the State U alumni department. They said you might be willing to speak with perspective students. Have I caught you at a good time?	Always tell them who you are and how you got their name. They usually don't get many of these calls. Be sure to respect their time.
Alumnus:	Hi Mike, I do have a few minutes now and I would be happy to talk to you. What kind of questions do you have?	Be prepared to set up a time to talk at a later date. Especially if you call someone at the office.
Mike:	Great! I've had my eye on State U for some time now but I'm worried that I may not get in. I was hoping that you could help me better understand life at State U and perhaps give me some direction on how I might position myself to be a good candidate. Do you have time to meet with me in person? I could stop by your office after school or maybe we could have lunch on the weekend.	Don't come right out and ask them to be your reference. You might not like them and they might not like you. You will need to meet them personally. Hopefully the alumnus is in your area and you can arrange an in-person meeting.
Alumnus:	Well, um, sure. I guess I could meet with you. How about you stop by my office on Friday at around 4:00 on Friday? Will that time work for you?	They may be hesitant to meet you at first, but most people will take some time to help out a student. If they can't meet for lunch you can set up a phone call with them at a later date.
Mike:	Friday works great. Where is your office?	Get the address, directions if you need them and a cell phone number in case you are running late you can call ahead.

During your meeting with the alumnus you will want to have done a little research on the college and come prepared with a few questions. This is a good time to ask relevant Zone and Nerve questions. Spend some time getting to know the person, ask questions about them and listen carefully to their answers.

If you like the person and are getting a good, friendly vibe from them, you can tell them a little more about yourself and why you think you would be a good candidate for State U. Highlight your NTA or any other special skills. Don't brag, but don't be too hard on yourself either. Believe me, no matter what you think of yourself, I promise you deserve the best education you can find. Your job is to exude friendly confidence. Tell them about your concerns with regard to getting in and what you think you bring to the table as it relates to the admissions process. For instance: "my GPA is only a 2.04, State U has an average incoming freshman GPA of 3.0. I need to position myself as someone different in my application. One thing I have going for me is that I've been raising homing pigeons for several years. I think they will find that unique."

If you have an NTA and have put some thought into the ideas in this book you will have an interesting conversation with the alum. They will find you interesting, I promise. At the end of the conversation you can make your pitch:

Mike:	Thank you very much for meeting me. I really have enjoyed our conversation. I know this might sound strange because you don't know me very well, but would you be willing to write me a recommendation for State U?	Acknowledge that the request is unusual given that you just met. Ask nicely.
Alumnus:	Really? I'm not sure. What do I have to do?	They may be surprised at your request but they probably won't. Be prepared for surprise and be prepared for them to say no. If they do say no don't sweat it. You can always call the next person on your list.
Mike:	It's a simple form that I can send you, but a short letter would be best. If you think I would be a good fit at State U then your recommendation will be great. You already know how interested I am in getting in so you can certainly speak to my enthusiasm. If you think I have anything unique to offer State U you can mention that too.	Take the pressure off. It's a simple process and the only thing they have to ask themselves is if they think you would be a good fit at State U.

Alumnus:	Sure. That sounds easy enough. You seem like a good guy. Send the form along and I'll take a look.	They may not 100% commit, but at least you have opened the door. The next step is to send them the information they need to write a recommendation.
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Do not be surprised or upset if they say no. This is very important. Do not get discouraged. They have every right to say no and it doesn't mean they don't like you. You should have received several names from the alumni department. Call them all. I'm sure one of them will write you a recommendation.

Encourage them to write a letter in addition to the reference form the college provides. The form itself does not provide much opportunity to be creative. Your reference will have more impact if they write a letter.

Be sure to follow-up with a thank you note and be sure to touch base after the letter has been received by the college. You can then coach them to make a call on your behalf or introduce you to people at the college you might reach out to. Even if they have been gone for twenty years they may still remember a professor they liked that is still there. It's all about networking. Don't push them too hard, anything they provide at this point is gravy. Make sure they know how much it means to you.

You can do it. It's easy, fun and productive.