

EVIDENCE, NOT ADJECTIVES

Recommendation Letters in the Age of AI

Regional Institute 2026 | South & Central Asia



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Which opener tells you the most?

A

"Rohan is, without question, the most talented student I have ever taught."

B

"Priya missed her first two Chemistry tests, then spent every lunch hour for a month reteaching herself the material until she topped the retest."

C

"Ananya is a hardworking, sincere and well-behaved student who is a pleasure to have in class."

Polished praise is easy to produce. Specific observation is harder to fake.



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Why this conversation matters:

When polished language is easier than ever to produce,
specific human observation becomes more valuable.

The question is not simply whether a letter is well written.
It is whether the reader has reason to believe it.



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Three perspectives on the same letter

THE SCHOOL

How do we know the student well enough to advocate meaningfully?

THE WRITER

How does observation become precise, authentic writing?

THE READER

What does an admissions officer learn, trust and remember?

A strong recommendation sits at the intersection of all three.



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What can a recommendation add?

Not another summary of the application.

GRADES

performance

ACTIVITIES

involvement

ESSAYS

self-presentation

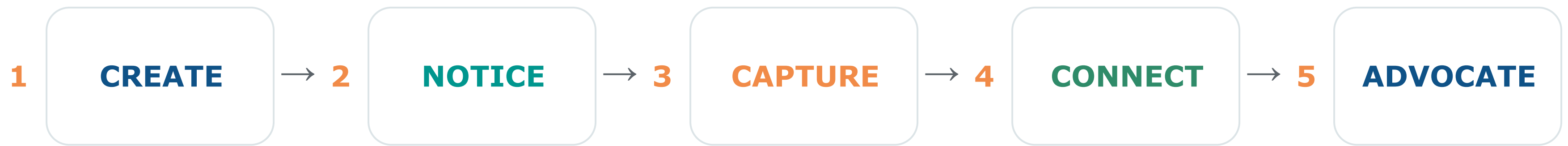
A recommendation can show how a student thinks, responds to challenge, affects a classroom, grows over time and behaves when nobody is scoring them.



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The strongest letters are built before they are written.

At our school, the process begins in Grade 11.



**We are not creating evidence for an application.
We are creating opportunities to know our students better.**



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CREATE: Make learning visible

Authentic opportunities within teaching can reveal far more than a mark.

Peer tutoring

Clarity, patience, responsibility

Beyond the curriculum

Current ideas and developments in the discipline

Collaborative work

Thinking, contribution and response to others

Design a class

Let the student teach or lead

Trace the discipline

Research an emerging idea, debate or development

The aim is not performance theatre.
It is visibility.



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NOTICE: Look beyond who got the answer right

- 1 How do they respond to a higher-order question?
- 2 Do they connect a concept to another subject or real life?
- 3 What happens after difficult feedback?
- 4 What do they do after a disappointing result?
- 5 What do they ask when the lesson is technically over?
- 6 What do they contribute when nobody is being assessed?



CAPTURE + CONNECT: Turn moments into usable evidence

CAPTURE

Record the student, the context, what happened and why it stood out.

Do it the same day when possible.

CONNECT

Brag sheets, resumes, report cards, projects, informal settings and previous teachers can add context.

They should inform observation, not replace it.



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Evidence, not adjectives

Intellectually curious What did the student ask, read, connect or pursue?

Resilient What happened after the setback?

Collaborative What did the student actually do for the group?

A natural leader How did others respond, and what changed because the student acted?

If the adjective disappears, the evidence should still carry the meaning.



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Try it: What does this observation tell us?

First instinct: choose an adjective. Then delete it.

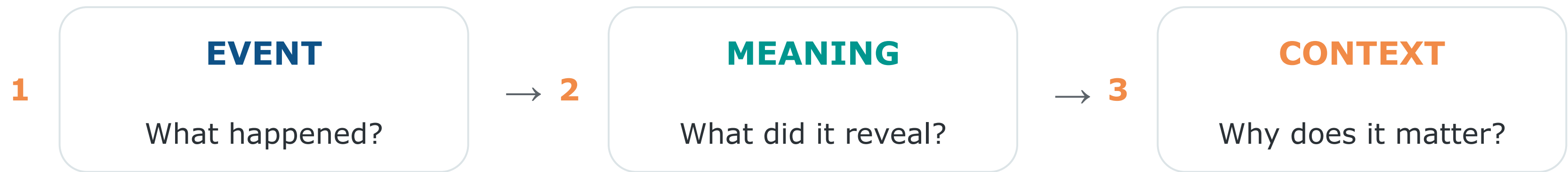
After a class discussion, a student stays behind to continue debating an idea with the teacher. Two days later, she returns having read two articles that challenge her original position.

What can the evidence itself show?



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An anecdote needs interpretation



**Could this anecdote belong to ten other students?
If yes, it probably needs more specificity.**

The writer's job is not only to report the moment, but to explain why it matters.



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What weakens credibility?

AVOID

- Repeating the resume
- Copying the brag sheet
- Unsupported superlatives
- Flowery vocabulary

ALSO WATCH FOR

- Long, complex sentences
- Generic praise
- Technical detail without interpretation
- Claims the teacher cannot verify

Credibility comes from selection, precision and honesty.



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One test for every recommendation

Think of at least one thing in every letter that you could only say about that student.

Especially for the student who is not obviously the 'top' student.

SHOW, DON'T TELL. SELECT, DON'T LIST. BE HONEST.



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On the other side of the desk

Questions for the admissions reader

- 1 What can a recommendation tell you that grades and essays cannot?
- 2 When does an anecdote genuinely change your understanding of a student?
- 3 What makes praise credible rather than inflated?
- 4 What information is often repeated unnecessarily?
- 5 How do you read context, growth or a setback?
- 6 Has AI changed what you notice or trust when writing recommendations?



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Where does AI belong?

The relationship and judgement must remain human.

BEFORE THE FIRST DRAFT

Gather resources.
Meet the student.
Draft independently.

Do not feed a brag sheet into an LLM and ask it to create the letter.

AFTER THE FIRST DRAFT

Use AI as a critic: identify repetition, test clarity and flag unsupported claims.

The teacher remains responsible for every fact and judgement.

AI can polish a sentence. It cannot supply a relationship.



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The Recommendation Lab

Work in pairs. Mark the letter before you rewrite anything.

- 1 Circle every adjective.
- 2 Underline the evidence.
- 3 Cross out anything already obvious from the resume.
- 4 Identify the one sentence only this recommender could write.
- 5 Rewrite one generic claim using evidence.

**The goal is not
more flowery
prose. It is a
more credible
recommendation.**



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What can you take back to school on Monday?

START EARLIER Treat Grade 11 as the beginning of recommendation work.

CREATE VISIBILITY Build authentic opportunities that reveal how students think and contribute.

CAPTURE QUICKLY Record specific moments before detail disappears.

PROTECT CREDIBILITY Verify claims, select evidence and avoid inflated language.

USE AI CAREFULLY Let it critique the writing, never manufacture the relationship.

How do we know our students well enough to advocate for them credibly?



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Questions & conversation

What is one recommendation practice you want to rethink?

That is the work behind the letter.

Thank you



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