

Tips for writing Letters of Recommendation

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Updated in 2020 by Dr. Jeanne Cawse-Lucas (Family Medicine) and Dr. Vicki Mendiratta (OBGYN)

Basics for Residency LORs:

- Put the student's ERAS ID number on it at least once (e.g., "I am pleased to recommend Bob Smith (ERAS 123456) for a position in your residency program).
- State that the student has waived the right to see the letter.
- Print it on letterhead. Include your personal contact info (email below your signature line).
- SIGN THE LETTER.

Intro:

- Who are you? What is your teaching role? If you work with lots of students, say so. THIS SHOULD BE KEPT VERY BRIEF – 1-2 sentences max.
- What is this letter recommending the student for? Be specific to the residency specialty. (Note: students may ask for separate, specific letters if they are applying in more than one discipline.)
- How well do you know the student? How long did you work with them? In what context?

Body:

- Describe the student's strengths that you observed. Be as generous and specific as you can. Use active language (see page 2 for examples). Clinical skills are most highly valued, so comment favorably on those if you can - if not, be effusive in the areas that make you feel the student is a good applicant. Include language that addresses the values of the specialty to which the student is applying.
- Describe other aspects to the student that make them unique: any special accomplishments in any domain can count. Service, research, and leadership are particularly valuable, but other activities are, too. Link this back to how these special skills make them a better clinician. Reading the student's CV can be very helpful for this part.
- Please don't call students "Dr." unless they have earned a PhD. Student doctor, Mr./Ms., or first names are acceptable.

Summary:

- **This may be the only paragraph that they read.**
- Recap student's strengths and what sets them apart.
- If you would want them in your own residency, say so.

Comparative statements (optional, but often valued by residencies)

- Best student in xx years, top xx%
- Recommend "strongly, highly, strongest, highest" "without reservation"
- Amazing, extraordinary, superb, outstanding, great, excellent

Other tips/guidelines:

- The best letter of recommendation is short enough to read (1 page) but detailed enough to make the student distinctive. The goal should be for the reader to choose this student over others with similar credentials, so show them why they're special.
- Do not agree to write a letter for a student if you cannot honestly give a strong recommendation.
- Letters that are effusive or positive in excess of what the student deserves will ultimately hurt future students, as your letters will be considered by program directors to be unreliable. Similarly, using the same praise for every student will make your letters less valuable.
- Brief anecdotes are helpful. Avoid quoting evaluations.
- Avoid any language that makes the student sound average: "competent", "solid", "good".
- Avoid saying that students "improved"; this implies they were bad to begin with and is frequently used as code for a less-stellar performance overall.
- Avoid damning with faint praise: saying a student is "reliable", "punctual", or a "hard worker" without praising clinical skills looks bad. If the student's greatest strengths are in these areas, tell an anecdote that shows why they're special.
- If you feel strongly about a student, a personal note to a program director counts for more than a letter of recommendation—especially if they know you. You can't do this often, but for occasional students it can mean a lot.

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The “5 C’s” of Good Letters – Ken Steinberg, MD and Christ Knight, MD

Concise – 1 page or less, program directors frequently start with the last paragraph.

Credible – What experience do you have with students? Be honest and generous.

Contextual – Where/when did you work with the student? What are their strengths in this context?

Concrete – Be as specific and descriptive as possible. Brief anecdotes are great; watch the length.

Comparative – How does this student compare to others you’ve taught? Would you want this student in your practice?

Buzz Words

Adjectives:		Verbs:
Accountable	Inquisitive	Analyze
Accurate	Intellectual	Apply
Ambitious	Kind	Construct
Analytical	Likable	Create
Articulate	Methodical	Demonstrate
Assertive	Motivated	Design
Attentive	Organized	Display
Calm	Outgoing	Employ
Capable	Outstanding	Exhibit
Compassionate	Patience	Explain
Dedicated	Personable	Express
Determined	Pleasant	Evaluate
Devoted	Punctual	Formulate
Eager	Reliable	Generate
Enthusiastic	Resourceful	Illustrate
Ethical	Respectful/respected	Instruct
Excellent	Responsible	Interpret
Flexible	Steady	Operate
Friendly	Systematic	Persevere
Good judgement	Tactful	Prepare
Good knowledge	Thoughtful	Relate
Integrity	Trustworthy	Show
Humorous	Well-read	Synthesize
Independent	Willing	Value
Initiative		

The following is a **sample introductory paragraph** that faculty in the WWAMI region might find useful to help explain the unique features of the WWAMI program.

It is my pleasure to recommend student _____ (ERAS #) for consideration for your residency program. I am a Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of X at the University of Washington School of Medicine and have been a regional attending physician in a teaching capacity for X years. The University of Washington serves as a regional medical school for the five states of Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, and Idaho (WWAMI). The school provides innovative, highly decentralized educational experiences to its students. Much of the third and fourth year clinical experiences are outside of greater Seattle. My students live in my community and have the opportunity to learn about (women’s health, care of the pediatric/surgical/psychiatric patient) in this (small, rural, underserved, urban, etc.) environment.

Avoiding racial bias in letter of reference writing

Got a great student or junior scholar who is a person of color (POC)? Planning to write a super letter of reference? Don't fall into these common traps rooted in unconscious bias.

Mention research & publications

Letters of reference for POC can be considerably shorter and at times do not highlight publications or research quality, compared to letters for white scholars. Make sure you highlight critical research accomplishments of POC scholars in every letter!

Don't stop now!

In addition to being shorter, letters for POC are less likely to give ringing endorsements and only include minimal assurance (they can do the job) or veiled praise ('surprisingly sharp') rather than a ringing endorsement ('they are the best for the job').

Emphasize accomplishments, not effort

Letters of reference for POC can overemphasize background and limitations faced over accomplishments. Emphasize accomplishments (their research 'skills', or career'). Do not use 'grindstone' adjectives that describe effort alone, ex. 'hard-working' that associates with effort, but not ability.

We all share bias

It is important to remember that unconscious racial bias isn't just a white people problem. Research shows that people of all races and ethnicities are susceptible to this common pitfall. This is a problem for all of us - let's solve it together!

Adjectives to use with caution:
caring, compassionate, hard-working, conscientious, dependable, diligent, dedicated, tactful, interpersonal, warm, helpful

Keep it professional

Letters of reference for POC (especially those from lower socioeconomic status, international background, etc) are more likely to mention personal information that is not relevant for the application, or expose details that the candidate might not want exposed (DACA, first generation, socioeconomic background, etc). Unless otherwise requested by the candidate or relevant for the award/application, stick to professional accomplishments and make sure you use formal titles and surnames.

Stay away from stereotypes

Although they describe positive traits, adjectives like 'diligent', 'dedicated', 'caring' and 'helpful' or terms such as 'activist' are frequently used in letters for POC and can evoke racial stereotypes which can hurt a candidate. And be careful not to invoke these stereotypes ('she is not angry or intimidating', or that 'their performance is above what you would expect from someone with their background').

Be careful raising doubt

We all want to write honest letters, but negative or irrelevant comments, such as 'challenging personality', 'unique background', or 'ability to speak English' are common in letters for POC applicants. Let the application speak for itself. Don't add doubt unless it is strictly necessary!

Adjectives to include:
successful, excellent, accomplished, outstanding, skilled, knowledgeable, insightful, resourceful, confident, ambitious, independent, intellectual

Avoiding gender bias in reference writing

Got a great student? Planning to write a super letter of reference?
Don't fall into these common traps based on unconscious gender bias.

Mention research & publications

Letters of reference for men are 4x more likely to mention publications and twice as likely to have multiple references to research. Make sure you put these critical accomplishments in every letter!

Don't stop now!

On average, letters for men are 16% longer than letters for women and letters for women are 2.5x as likely to make a minimal assurance ('she can do the job') rather than a ringing endorsement ('she is the best for the job').

Emphasize accomplishments, not effort

Letters for reference for men are more likely to emphasize accomplishments ('his research', 'his skills', or 'his career') while letters for women are 50% more likely to include 'grind-stone' adjectives that describe effort. 'Hard-working' associates with effort, but not ability.

We all share bias

It is important to remember that unconscious gender bias isn't a male problem. Research shows that women are just as susceptible to these common pitfalls as men. This is a problem for all of us - let's solve it together!

Keep it professional

Letters of reference for women are 7x more likely to mention personal life - something that is almost always irrelevant for the application. Also make sure you use formal titles and surnames for both men and women.

Stay away from stereotypes

Although they describe positive traits, adjectives like 'caring', 'compassionate', and 'helpful' are used more frequently in letters for women and can evoke gender stereotypes which can hurt a candidate. And be careful not to invoke these stereotypes directly ('she is not emotional').

Be careful raising doubt

We all want to write honest letters, but negative or irrelevant comments, such as 'challenging personality' or 'I have confidence that she will become better than average' are twice as common in letters for female applicants. Don't add doubt unless it is strictly necessary!

Adjectives to avoid: Adjectives to include:

caring
compassionate
hard-working
conscientious
dependable
diligent
dedicated
tactful
interpersonal
warm
helpful

successful
excellent
accomplished
outstanding
skilled
knowledgeable
insightful
resourceful
confident
ambitious
independent
intellectual

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Research from Trix, F & Psenka, C. Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty. *Discourse & Society*, 2003; and Madera, JM, Hebl, MR, & Martin, RC. Gender and letters of Recommendation for Academia: Agentive and Communal Differences. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2009.



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