

Tips for writing Letters of Recommendation

Drs. Jared Strote (Emergency Medicine) and Chris Knight (Internal Medicine)

Updated by Dr. Jeanne Cawse-Lucas (Family Medicine) 2013

Basics:

- 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 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? It's okay to be generic (e.g. "your residency program") if the student is applying in multiple specialties.
- 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. 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 don't forget music, athletics, etc. – obviously it's best to 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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Buzz Words

Adjectives:

Accountable
Accurate
Ambitious
Analytical
Articulate
Assertive
Attentive
Calm
Capable
Compassionate
Dedicated
Determined
Devoted
Eager
Enthusiastic
Ethical
Excellent
Flexible
Friendly
Good judgement
Good knowledge
Integrity
Humorous
Independent
Initiative
Inquisitive
Intellectual
Kind
Likable
Methodical
Motivated
Organised
Outgoing
Outstanding
Patience
Personable
Pleasant
Punctual
Reliable
Resourceful
Respectful/respected
Responsible
Steady
Systematic
Tactful
Thoughtful
Trustworthy
Well-read
Willing

Verbs:

Analyze
Apply
Construct
Create
Demonstrate
Design
Display
Employ
Exhibit
Explain
Express
Evaluate
Formulate
Generate
Illustrate
Instruct
Interpret
Operate
Persevere
Prepare
Relate
Show
Synthesize
Value