

A Guide to Writing Letters of Recommendation

Before writing a letter of recommendation:

1. Set up a meeting with the student/resident
2. Ask the learner to remind you of some memorable patients or encounters you have had together.
3. Ask for the learner's C.V. and Personal Statement beforehand
4. Spend a few minutes doing a free recall about the learner. If possible, look back at evaluations you have completed of the learner (it is helpful if you have been specific in these!)
5. If you are considering mentioning personal life, ask the learner first. If in doubt, leave it out!
6. Determine how strongly you recommend the learner

Writing the letter of recommendation:

1. Introduction Paragraph:
 - Describe your relationship with the learner, i.e., how long and in what context you worked with the learner. Consider a short declaration of the strength of your recommendation ('this is one of the best students I have worked with in 20 years of teaching' OR 'this is a fine student who will be an asset to your program')
2. Body of the letter (1-2 Paragraphs)
 - Be **specific** and **enthusiastic** in your support. This is a letter of recommendation after all!
 - Avoid generic descriptions or bland letters. Support every superlative with evidence.
 - Omissions can speak louder than words. If possible, describe the learner's skills across **multiple competencies**. (medical knowledge, patient care, communication, professionalism, interprofessional collaboration, self-directed learning and improvement). If you discuss communication skills in depth, but do not mention patient care/medical knowledge for example, then Program Directors may read into this).
 - Describe the learner's unique characteristics, with specific **examples** of their performance
 - Include aspects that make them stand out in comparison to their peers.
 - You may choose to highlight specific extracurricular activities or honors and put them in perspective ('what is even more remarkable is that this student was able to succeed in school despite having to work two full time jobs.'). but don't waste valuable space extensively detailing CV items that are already discussed elsewhere.
3. Conclusion Paragraph
 - Summarize the strength of your recommendation. The unofficial hierarchy is as follows: the best I have seen in 20 years > truly or simply outstanding > outstanding > excellent > very good > solid > qualified. If you write more than one letter, be careful of rating both students as "the best I have ever seen". Consider, "in the top 1% of all students I have come across."
 - If such a statement truly captures your beliefs, it is helpful to say something like "This individual would be strongly competitive in our program;" or "I would be delighted to have this individual care for my family;"

Use official letterhead; Check for grammar/spelling; Sign with your official university title

After writing a letter of recommendation, ask yourself:

1. Did I avoid gendered or personality-based language?

*Letters for men tend to include more about accomplishments (ie research, skills, leadership) while letters for women tend to include more 'grindstone' adjectives that describe effort.

Avoid: Describing men primarily on knowledge, skills, abilities, talent while describing women based on their work effort, personality, or interpersonal traits (caring, compassionate, hard-working, conscientious, dependable, diligent, dedicated, tactful, warm, helpful)

Do: Describe ALL learners based on their knowledge, skills, and abilities (successful, accomplished, skilled, knowledgeable, insightful, resourceful, confident, ambitious, independent, intellectual). Balance your descriptors carefully.

Consider using an online gender equity calculator such as

<https://www.tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/> or <http://slowe.github.io/genderbias/>.

2. Did I raise doubt unintentionally through negative language ("While...") or hedging ("It appears...")? Is the strength of my praise consistent with my intention? Look out for superlatives (best, brightest) vs faint praise ("Returns phone calls promptly. I have confidence she will be better than average.").

* 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').

Avoid: Describing men or non URiM learners with superlatives (best, brightest, great, wonderful) while using faint praise such as 'competent' or 'adequate' for women and URiM students.

Do: Use superlative language consistently across all applicants based on their performance and accomplishments.

3. Did I mention personal life unintentionally?

*Letters of reference for women are 7x more likely to mention personal life – something that is almost always irrelevant for the application.

Avoid: Describing women's personal life more than men.

Do: Check with the student if you feel it would be helpful to the student to mention their personal or family life in a letter. Use a consistent approach toward discussing personal life with all students.

4. Is the length of the letter appropriate?

*On average, letters for men are 16% longer than letters for women.

Do: Review the length of your letters. Make sure your letters are of similar length for all applicants, with attention to women, men, and students of different race/ethnicities. As a rule of thumb, the ideal letter fits on one page or just over.

Kristen Lewis 2022. Adapted from Catherin Lucey (2005) and Cynthia Ledford (2017); Additions reflect content from UCSF School of Medicine "Avoiding Bias in Letters of Recommendation" and "Promoting Equity in Letters of Recommendation: Practical Strategies for Recognizing and Overcoming Bias" as Presented by Machen J, Moreland C, Gandhi S, and Salib S. Academic Internal Medicine Week 2022.