

Writing Recommendation Letters:

Some suggestions

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Q: Should I write?

- First, what is “at stake”?
 - Confirmatory information, or is your letter critical to the application?
 - The more competitive the program is, the “higher the stakes”

Q: If Yes, then what do I need?

- Resume
- Personal or candidate statement
- Information about the program
- Transcript or list of courses
- Letter of recommendation form (if required)
- Graded work sample or writing sample



Decision makers are looking for:

- Useful, candid, honest information
 - Both positive **and** negative (which provides a realistic perspective on strengths and weaknesses)
- Important and unique information about:
 - Personal characteristics, interpersonal qualities, classroom abilities/ behaviors (work ethic, preparation, attendance)
- Letters found to be **least** helpful:
 - repetition of information on the application
 - unsubstantiated superlatives
 - description of a grade in one particular class – indicates a limited knowledge of the person
 - inclusion of irrelevant information (such as family connections or religious beliefs)



Behavioral-based interviewing

(how does that inform letter writing?)

□ Situation/Task Action Result

- Example: Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.

□ Advice to letter writers:

- State your opinions on the student's strengths and back them up with examples and evidence.
- Example: "Mary is the most sought-after biology tutor because of her maturity, knowledge of the material, and listening skills."



Advice from medical schools

- ❑ Tell us “who she is.”
- ❑ What makes him unique?
- ❑ What is your relationship to the student?
- ❑ Compare her with others who have been admitted to a similar program.
- ❑ Provide insight on the student’s motivation.
- ❑ A “reluctant and tepid endorsement” can be the kiss of death.
- ❑ It’s okay to talk about weaknesses or area that needs improvement (the letter can seem more “real”). Some caution is required!



Better letters of recommendation

from Graduate Admission Essays, Donald Asher, Ten Speed Press, 2000.

- ❑ Get enough data to do the job
- ❑ Assemble a laundry list of **basic skills** and supporting information
- ❑ Describe a particularly successful project
- ❑ Cite challenges the student has overcome
- ❑ Focus on an “above and beyond” story
- ❑ Close the letter by predicting success – be as specific as possible



12 Competencies sought by employers

Phil Gardner, Director, Collegiate Employment Research Institute, Michigan State University

- ❑ Working in a diverse environment
- ❑ Acquiring knowledge
- ❑ Communicating effectively
- ❑ Thinking critically
- ❑ Solving problems
- ❑ Contributing to a team
- ❑ Performing with integrity
- ❑ Balancing work and life
- ❑ Navigating across boundaries
- ❑ Developing professional competencies
- ❑ Embracing change



Personal Characteristics and Social Skills sought by med schools

from “Composing a Letter that Captures the Applicant as an Individual,” NAAHP Newsletter, 2008.

- ☐ Leadership
- ☐ Ability to work collaboratively
- ☐ Honesty and integrity
- ☐ Responsibility and dedication
- ☐ Motivation
- ☐ Empathy
- ☐ Communication skills
- ☐ Service to others
- ☐ Problem solving ability
- ☐ Exposure to the profession
- ☐ Common sense and judgment