

Letter of Recommendation Essentials

Only agree to write a letter if you can write an honest & strong recommendation!

Step 1. Introduction³

- Who you are, your teaching role and experience with students (1-2 sentences)
- What recommendation is for (i.e., specific residency specialty)
- How well you know individual (time and context you worked with student)
- Indicate if recommended candidate has waived (or not waived) the right to review the letter



Step 2. Body³

- Describe an individual's strengths – specific, includes clinical skills and addresses tenets within residency specialty
 - Explain strength(s) with brief anecdote
 - Unique aspects of individual – service, research, leadership, and accomplishments that align with being an excellent clinician
 - Balance types of praise and avoid using same praise for every individual
 - Avoid average language, faint praise, or that individual "improved" as it implies subpar performance
- ! Words to Use with Caution:** ^{1, 2}
- Capable
 - Caring
 - Hard-working
 - Helpful
 - Interpersonal
 - Lovely
 - Tactful
 - Warm



Step 3. Summary³

- Most critical - most frequently read paragraph
- Summarize strengths
- Comparisons optional and may include:
 - "Best student in # years or top %"
 - "Recommend 'highest, highly, or without reservation'"
- Would you recruit them as a resident?



Valued Features of a Recommendation Letter

Program directors value:⁴

- Depth of interaction
- Specific traits and abilities of applicant
- Summative statement on strength of recommendation
- Personal stories about applicant

Honesty is the best policy!⁵

- Be honest and specific – do not exaggerate, use precise adjectives, give details on how student exhibited qualities and any accomplishments
- Show enthusiasm, engage reader, stay on topic
- Proofread and provide your contact information

ALWAYS...

- ✓ **Keep comments professional.**
- ✓ **Use formal titles and surnames.**
- ✓ **Keep format and length (1-page) consistent for all letters.**

AVOID Biases and Common Pitfalls^{1, 2, 5}

- ⚠ **DO NOT use informal names**
- ⚠ **DO NOT mention background, personal life, or personal beliefs (e.g., age, care-taking, children, marital status, politics, religion)**
- ⚠ **DO NOT describe effort, limitations, or raise doubts**
- ⚠ **DO NOT write irrelevant or negative comments or give a short/minimal endorsement**

Note: This resource is for personal recommendation letters only, not Standardized Letter of Evaluations (SLOEs). Refer to specialty-specific SLOE templates in your field.

References

1. Asmeret Asefaw Berhe & Sora Kim, University of California, Merced. (n.d.). *Avoiding racial bias in letter of reference writing*. Based on Avoiding Gender Bias in Reference Writing flyer from University of Arizona <https://tinyurl.com/y8vub7nd>
2. Commission on the Status of Women, The University of Arizona (n.d.). *Avoiding gender bias in reference writing*. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/y8vub7nd>
3. Jared Strote (Emergency Med) & Dr. Chris Knight (Internal Med) Updated in 2020 by Dr. Jeanne Cawse-Lucas (Family Med) & Dr. Vicki Mendiratta (OBGYN). *Tips for writing letters of recommendation*.
4. Saudek, K., Saudek, D., Treat, R., Bartz, P., Weigert, R., & Weisgerber, M. (2018). Dear program director: Deciphering letters of recommendation. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, 10(3), 261-266. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-17-00712.1>
5. Weiss Roberts, L., & Termuehlen, G. (2013). (Honest) Letters of Recommendation. *Academic Psychiatry*, 37(1), 55-59.