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2017 Faculty Development Day

Best Practices for Writing Letters of Recommendation



What is a recommendation letter?



- A chance to pass on the torch to a deserving student
- Part of the professional school application package
 - Goes beyond the GPA/Scores narrative
- A way to establish yourself as a mentor and educator
- Part of our jobs as teachers and mentors

- Why are we here:
 - Most advice out there is for students requesting rec letters
 - No one to teach us how to write letters in graduate schools



What is not a recommendation letter?



- A chore to practice procrastination with
- A template form
- A check list item in the application process
- A reward for an good grade/task well done



Why are they so important?



- They grant an opportunity to the admissions committee to meet the candidate through the eyes/experiences of a peer
- They provide context to the admissions committee on the student's academic & research performance and their competencies
- Depending on the field, less focus being placed on candidates scores and more on holistic approaches (the candidate as a person & future scientist/lawyer/physician).



How to prepare



- Ask for resume, personal statement, transcript and other relevant material
- Meet with the student, discuss their plans/goals
- Read the instructions and/or do your research.
- Ask colleagues you respect for samples, learn from others

+ Content and Structure



- Introduce yourself and the candidate:
 - Your qualifications (but without making letter bout yourself)
 - Nature and timing of your relationship with the student
- Present the candidate truthfully, but positively
 - Give specific examples “Show it, don’t say it”
 - Rank/compare to previous students, quantify their accomplishments
 - Address the requirements of the career and how the candidate’s personal attributes can contribute to the field
 - Circumstances/obstacles student has faced that they should not discuss on personal statement
 - Weaknesses the student has overcome



Content and Structure 2



- Want to take it “Pro?”
 - Make it memorable (but not kooky)
 - Beware of what you leave out
 - Were you involved in the student’s decision of pursuing this career? That’s a good story to tell.
- When and how to discuss personal information?
 - Only when the student asks you and you are comfortable with it
- End by showing your willingness to help further



What to NEVER include



- Irrelevant information to the career
 - religion, ethnicity, age, hobbies...
 - In some circumstances it might sound relevant to career (some one applying to Divinity School, for example). Discuss only if student asks you to do so.
- Inaccuracies
 - Overhyping the student can/will backfire, to you AND the student



Graduate School

William H. Gottdiener, Ph.D., FIPA

Professor

Psychology Department



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Types of students that request letters for grad school



- A student I have worked closely as a research advisor or who I also taught in a class and whose academic work I hold in high regard.
 - This is a student with strong academic credentials and who is a likable and shows strong interest in pursuing a career, usually in psychology. The letters I write for these students are detailed, discuss my experience with and impressions of the student's work and the student's ability to succeed. I discuss any blemishes or potential concerns on the student's record and discuss whether I think the person would make a good colleague. I ask the student for a CV, personal statement, and discuss the outlines of the letter with them and that it will be a strong letter. I always start the letter by stating that I am enthusiastically writing the letter for them and end by stating that they have my highest recommendation.
- A student who I don't know well, but who did well in one of my classes. I tell the student that the letter will be seen as a tepid endorsement of the student. The student often wants it because they have trouble getting other letters.
- A student who I don't like or don't know well and who I won't endorse. I always turn these requests down and tell students I don't know them well enough to write a strong letter for them.



A typical letter for Grad School



- They look for 3 letters of recommendation and at least 1 from a professor or research advisor who knows the student well and can write a detailed letter of recommendation discussing the work that the student did and their potential for success in grad school and in the field. These letters are usually 1.5-2 pages long.
- These letters can be written by a doctoral student too if that student supervised the person's research and/or taught them in a class.

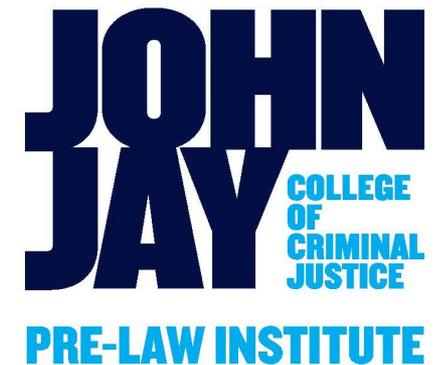


Law School

Elizabeth R. Broccoli, JD

Assistant Director

Pre-Law Institute & Center for Post-Graduate Opportunities





Law School Application Process – Recommendation Letters



- Recommendations are submitted electronically or via the mail in the fall to LSAC (lsac.org).
- Applicants must submit 2-3 letters of recommendation.
- Applicants direct LSAC where to send the letters of recommendation.
- The title or field of the recommender is less important than how well the writer knows the applicant.



What Do Law Schools Want to Know?



- How are the student's communication skills? (reading, writing, speaking)
- How are the student's critical thinking and logical reasoning skills?
- Does the student have leadership skills?
- How does the student compare with other students you have taught?
- How would you assess the student's maturity?
- Has the student spoken to you about his or her plans to become a lawyer?



Additionally...



- Stories or examples are helpful because they are memorable.
- It is reasonable to ask to see a student's resume, personal statement draft, transcript and any graded assignments from your class.
- It is OK to ask the student if she or he would like you to discuss something specific in the letter (ex. background information, full-time employment, personal issues), but do not ask the student to draft the letter for you.
- The Pre-Law Institute is available to provide feedback or assistance as you write recommendations! We are in 8.66 NB and can be reached at pli@jjay.cuny.edu.

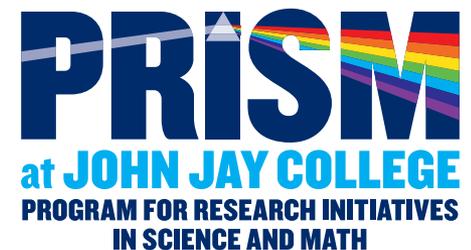


Medical School

Edgardo Sanabria-Valentin, Ph.D.

Assoc. Program Director, PRISM

Pre-Health Advisor





Med School Application Process – Recommendation Letters



- Pre-med students apply through AMCAS (MD), AACOMAS (DO), or TMDSAS (Texas MD)
 - Each health profession has its own CAS
- Each school request number/types of letters, generally 3-4
 - Faculty/research
 - Medical professionals
 - Community/service...
- The title or field of the recommender is **AS** important than how well the writer knows the applicant.



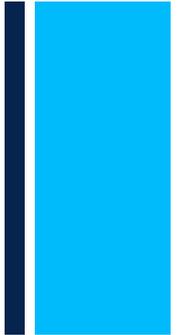
Committee Letter vs. Package Letter vs. Individual letters



- Committee letters:
 - From a Pre-Health Advisory Committee
 - Individual letters, one-on-one assessments, student's history
 - Provide an institutional perspective
- Package letter:
 - Cover letter with rankings + all other individual letters from the College
- Individual letters



What Do Med Schools Want to Know?



- Provide an accurate assessment of the applicant's suitability for medical school rather than advocate for the applicant.
 - Focus on behaviors that you have observed directly when describing applicants' suitability for medical school.
- Your relationship with the candidate (timeline, capacity, contact).
- Information NOT found elsewhere on the application.
- Ranking/Comparisons
- Unique contributions to the incoming class
 - Road traveled & overcoming obstacles
 - How applicant can contribute to the field
- Core, entry level competencies

+ The Competencies

■ **Thinking and Reasoning Competencies**

- Critical Thinking
- Quantitative Reasoning
- Scientific Inquiry
- Written Communication

■ **Science Competencies**

- Living Systems
- Human Behavior

■ **Interpersonal Competencies**

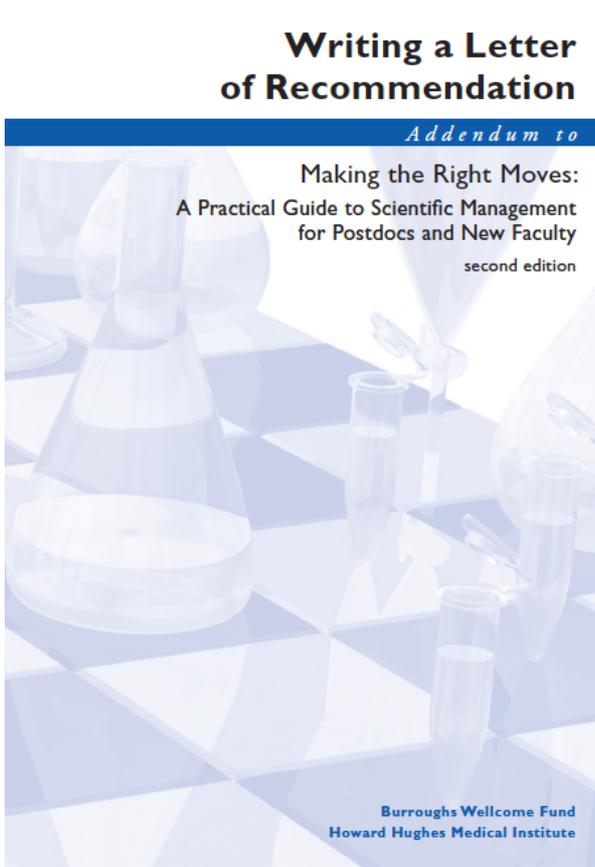
- Service Orientation
- Social Skills
- Cultural Competence
- Teamwork
- Oral Communication

■ **Intrapersonal Competencies**

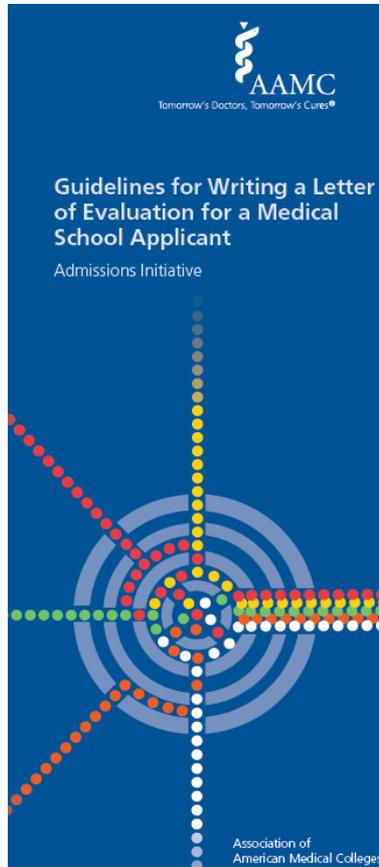
- Ethical Responsibility to Self & Others
- Reliability & Dependability
- Resilience & Adaptability
- Capacity for Improvement



Resources



<https://www.hhmi.org/sites/default/files/Educational%20Materials/Lab%20Management/letter.pdf>



<https://www.staging.aamc.org/initiatives/admissioninitiative/letters/>



<https://www.lsac.org/jd/applying-to-law-school/cas/or-evaluations>



Let's discuss...

- Writing a “not-so-enthusiastic” letter
- When should you NOT accept a request for a letter of recommendation?
- How to turn down a request?
- Avoiding gender (and other) bias.
- Teaching our students to request a letter of recommendation.