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**JOHN  
JAY** COLLEGE  
OF  
CRIMINAL  
JUSTICE  
**PRE-LAW INSTITUTE**

**PRISM**  
at **JOHN JAY COLLEGE**  
PROGRAM FOR RESEARCH INITIATIVES  
IN SCIENCE AND MATH

**Spring 2019 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
- What are they not:
  - An extra chore
  - A template form
  - A check list item in the application process



# 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, political leanings, 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



# A “Not So Enthusiastic” Letter



- Give the letter a positive tone, but omit mentioning the qualities that the profession requires that you think the student lacks
  - Recommend with concerns
  - Avoid superlative adjectives like enthusiastic, excited...
- Only mention glaring negative qualities if you think the student has taken steps to remediate
  - “Room for improvement,” “has worked hard on...,” “made great/some progress in...”
- For other negatives, put it “on them”
  - “... although John has struggled with statistics in his coursework, I am sure with the preparation he will receive at...”
- A short letter of less than a page sends a strong signal
  - Avoid irrelevant information: If you don’t have much to say, that is OK...

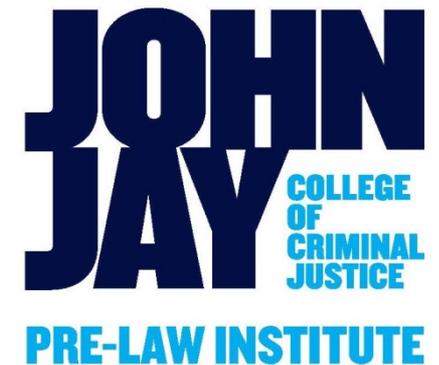


# Law School

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Associate Director

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# Law School Application Process – Recommendation Letters



- Recommendations are submitted electronically or via the mail in the fall to LSAC ([lsac.org](http://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](mailto:pli@jjay.cuny.edu).

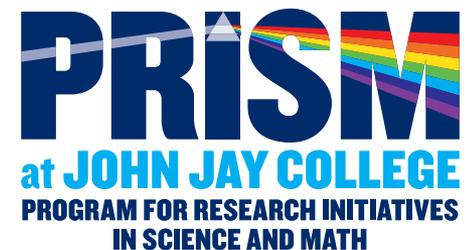


# Medical School

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# 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 can be 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/skills that you have observed directly when describing applicants' suitability for medical school instead of why the student is deserving of a chance
- Describe 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 of medicine
- Core, entry level competencies

# + AAMC Competencies

## ■ **Thinking and Reasoning Competencies**

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

## ■ **Science Competencies**

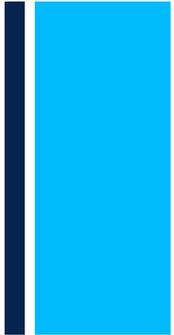
- Living Systems
- Human Behavior

## ■ **Pre-Professional Competencies**

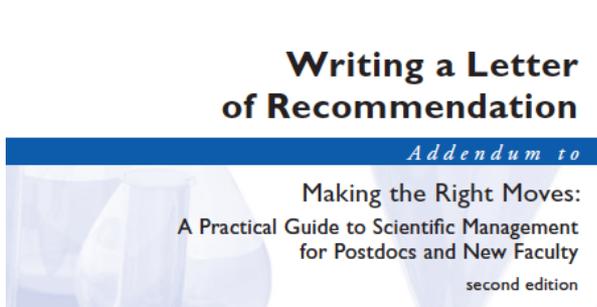
- Service Orientation
- Social Skills
- Cultural Competence
- Teamwork
- Oral Communication
- Ethical Responsibility to Self & Others
- Reliability & Dependability
- Resilience & Adaptability
- Capacity for Improvement



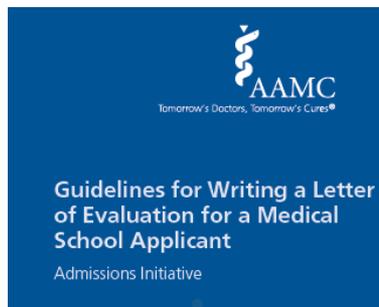
# Resources



- Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) at John Jay> Resources>Mentoring (next week!)



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



<https://students-residents.aamc.org/advisors/guidelines-writing-letter-evaluation/>



<https://www.lsac.org/jd/applying-to-law-school/cas/lor-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.