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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 2020 Faculty Development Day**

# Best Practices for Writing Letters of Recommendation

# + Topics of Discussion



- Letters of Recommendation in General
  - How to prepare
  - Structure
  - What not to do
- Letters of Recommendation for Post-Graduate/Professional School
  - Medical School
  - Law School



# What is a recommendation letter?



- A chance to pass on the torch to a deserving student
- They are important because they introduce our students beyond their academic records and test scores
- Part of the professional school application package
  - Goes beyond the GPA/Scores and student narrative
  - Gives the opinion of a colleague
- 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

# + Types of Letters of Recommendation

- Graduate School
- Professional School (Law School, Medical School, etc.)
- Scholarships/Fellowships/Internships
- Letters of Reference

# + 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

**A**

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To whom it may concern,

**B** It is with great pleasure and enthusiasm that I write this letter of recommendation for [redacted] in support of her application to Princeton University. As the Associate Director at our Program for Research Initiatives in Science and Math (PRISM) I have the privilege of being involved in the development of our students as scientists. Admission to PRISM is competitive, and only our strongest students gain admission to our Undergraduate Research Program. Julie is one of those students.

**C** I met [redacted] five years ago, before she applied to become part of our program. Our first conversation was about preparing for medical school (I also serve as Pre-Health Advisor to the College) and about opportunities at our school to develop beyond the classroom. We continued talking regularly and bonded over our love of home fermented foods and the science behind the fermentation process. Her excitement to discover and learn how science is done was encouraging to me. When she applied to our Undergraduate Research Program I was happy to offer her a spot based on my previous interactions with her. She chose to continue working with Dr. Angelique Corthals on a project in forensic pathology, looking at markers of drowning. But her exposure to the process of science and through what she learned in courses as she progressed in our Cell & Molecular Biology major inspired her to explore more about what it took to become a researcher. She now plans to attend graduate school on her way to not just be the first person in her family to obtain a college degree, but to obtain a doctorate.

**D** I had also the pleasure to have [redacted] in my Microbiology Laboratory class in the fall of 2016. The lab, which is taught independently from the class, takes a hands-on approach to the practice of microbiology as a profession. A quarter of the grade for this class is a lab report on a multi-week exercise isolating and identifying microorganisms used to produce foods (in our case, yogurt), and comparing the findings between different brands and different methods. Julie's lab report was the one of the best ones in class (and one of the best I have read in my career), and it displayed her understanding of the subject (by not just writing about what she did but why she did it) and also her inquisitiveness (by using her conclusions to develop and present a new hypothesis she would like to test). She went above and beyond the expectations of this assignment. In this class she also demonstrated effective interpersonal skills, she worked well with her lab partner and helped other students in the class that were struggling with the technical aspects of the exercises.

**D** The final project of the class was a presentation on an assigned bacterial specie of industrial or health relevance. The goal was to make the student go beyond the facts that can be found in the literature and to use the natural history of the specie to develop a new

method to enrich for and isolate it from its natural habitat. [redacted] took the assignment to heart with her presentation on *Bacillus thuringiensis*. She and her partner delved not only on the interesting aspects of this bacterium, but they presented a detailed proposal of how to isolate it from the environment by taking advantage of its pesticide properties.

Unlike most other undergraduate research programs, PRISM does not only recruit students that plan to attend doctoral programs after their undergraduate education. We look for students who show promise and talent and expose them to the process of science, beyond the classroom. So, it is always a special moment when I see one of our students discover that they want to dedicate their lives to a career in research. I believe [redacted] has the talent, drive and commitment to become a successful scientist. Over the last year she has been part of the Bridges to the Doctorate Program at Columbia, to which she applied to get a more in-depth research experience before applying to graduate programs. A couple of months ago I went to see her presentation at their annual symposium, and was blown away by both her project and the way she communicated it to an audience of non-experts.

**F** I have absolutely no reservations recommending [redacted] to your program and I look forward to the day that I will call Julie my colleague. Please feel free to contact me with any further questions.

Warmest regards,



Edgardo Sanabria-Valentin, Ph.D.

- A. Institutional letterhead**
- B. Introduce yourself/credentials**
- C. How do you know the candidate, why are you their chosen recommender?**
- D. Example-based narrative**
- E. Compare candidate to peers if possible**
- F. Offer help**

# + 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.
- Innaccuracies
  - 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...



## Let's discuss...

- 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.

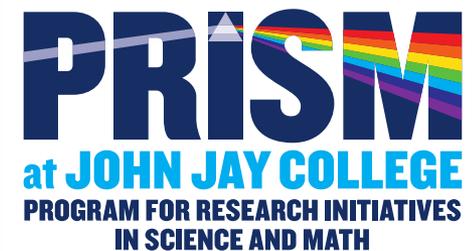


# Medical School

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 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

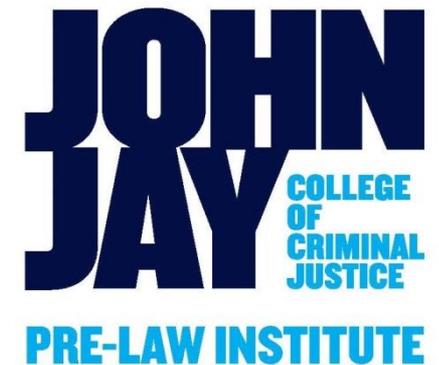


# Law School

Elizabeth R. Broccoli, JD

Associate 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](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?

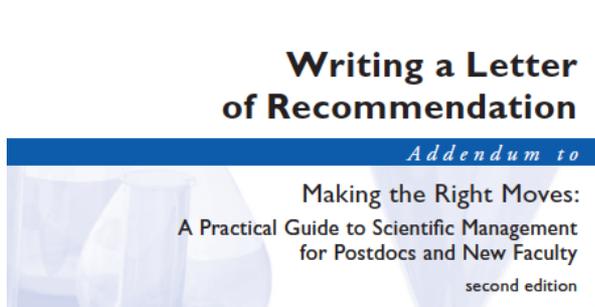
- How are the student's communication skills? (reading, writing, speaking)
- How are the student's critical thinking and logical reasoning skills?
- Does the student have leadership skills?
- How does the student compare with other students you have taught?
- How would you assess the student's maturity?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

# + Additionally...

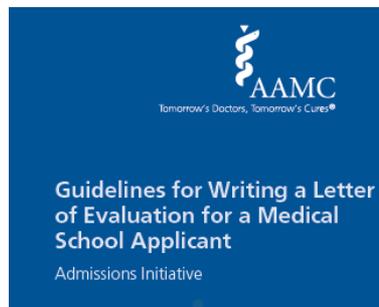
- Stories or examples are helpful because they are memorable.
- It is reasonable to ask to see a student's resume, personal statement draft, transcript and any graded assignments from your class.
- It is OK to ask the student if she or he would like you to discuss something specific in the letter (ex. 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).

# + 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>