

To Whom it May Concern: Writing an Effective Letter of Recommendation

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Presentation objectives

- By the end of this presentation, the participant should be able to:
 - Identify information that must be obtained from an applicant in order to write a strong letter of recommendation.
 - Describe the appropriate content of a letter of recommendation.
 - Recognize the characteristics of a strong (and a weak) letter of recommendation.

Importance of the letter

- Huge responsibility
- Can mean the difference in whether or not they get the desired position
- Survey of 73 pharmacy residency programs
 - Reported having 5675 applications for 355 positions
 - Most important factor for determining if applicant received an interview was:
 - overall impression of candidate (based on CV and letters of recommendation)
 - letters of recommendation

Hillebrand K. Am J Health-Syst Pharm 2015

Should you always say “yes”?

- You should say “no” if:
 - you cannot be emphatically positive in support of an applicant
 - you do not have the time material to write a good letter
 - you think you are not the person to write a letter



Importance of the source of the letter

Percent of Programs Considering factor "Critical" or "Important"		
Source of Letter:	PGY1 (%)	PGY2 (%)
Clinical preceptor	100	100
Residency program director	NA	98.8
Previous employer	97.7	NA
Basic science faculty	88.6	77.1
Personal reference (e.g., friend or family)	81.3	78.3
Pharmacy school administrator	48.1	36.1
Dean of pharmacy school	26	90.4

Jellinek-Cohen. Am J Health Syst Pharm 2012

Information to get from the applicant

- List of programs/jobs applying to
 - list of all deadlines
 - site specific requirements and information (e.g., who to address the letter to, submission information, specific areas to address in the letter, any additional forms or requirements)
- Updated copy of their curriculum vitae
 - including applicant's contact information
 - any areas/items the applicant would like you to bring attention to?

Information to get from the applicant

- Applicant's career goals
- Information about the position they are seeking
 - helps to illustrate why they would be a good fit for the position, and how it fits with their career goals
- Who else is writing letters?
- Information to make letter complete and specific
 - examples that illustrate desired qualities

Desired knowledge, skills, characteristics

- Motivation and initiative
- Strong work ethic; effective time management
- Ability to successfully carry out projects
- Emotional stability and maturity
- Ability to write clearly and effectively
- Ability to communicate articulately and persuasively
- Teaching skills (or potential)
- Ability to deal effectively with a wide variety of people
- Creativity and originality
- Strong knowledge base; capable of analytical thought
- Strong character; high ethical standards
- Special skills (e.g., technology, research)
- Leadership ability
- Ability to handle conflict and stress successfully
- Ability to work productively as a team member

Appleby 2000, Keenan, Mauer 1999

Discussing sensitive areas with the applicant

- Potential problem areas or weaknesses
 - example: lack of leadership experience on CV
 - identify it as a potential area of growth
 - lift out examples where the applicant has demonstrated the quality in an informal environment
- Hardships that have impacted the applicant
 - example: significant hardship such as the death of significant other

Opening

- Ideally address letter to specific person or team
 - e.g.,: program director, admission committee, etc.
- Dear _____ :
 - It is a pleasure to write in support of...
 - It is my greatest honor to write in support...
- Explain the relationship
 - Include how long and how well you know the applicant
 - Try to personalize relationship if possible or provide direct observations

Own qualifications

- Why are you uniquely qualified to recommend this applicant?
 - Be brief, don't need a CV on yourself...
 - Your time to establish credibility in reader's eyes
- Emphasis on how your past experiences gives you unique insight on applicant's performance

Applicants strengths and qualities

- Ok to highlight items in resume or CV, but bring new information into letter
 - Relate to the reason for application
- Why this specific candidate would be great fit/addition
 - Make them already picture in role

Applicant's strengths and qualities

- Relate to the position, highlight skill set application to project or task
 - Provide example how applicant applied a skill to accomplish a task or objective
- Examples of teamwork or leadership through adversity helps demonstrate:
 - Personality & traits during periods of stress

BE SPECIFIC !!!



Comparison

- What sets applicant apart?
 - Can compare with other experiences
 - A memorable story or anecdote
- Try to use definitive statements if possible
 - "The best", "Top 20% of pharmacists I've ever worked with", "The most"
 - Make sure you mean it though...

Wrap-up

- Summarize
 - "In conclusion, I am happy to give Mr. Harris my highest recommendation..."
 - Main points to re-emphasize
 - Re-state the "whys" this applicant this applicant should be selected and what they bring to the team
- Provide contact information
 - End statement about willingness to discuss applicant further
 - How do they contact you?
 - "Wet" signature if possible

Key points

- Tell a "Story"
 - Letter should be personal and convey enthusiasm while maintaining professionalism
- Engage the reader, share memorable information or examples
- Make the reader picture the applicant as already part of their team and how they can help support their objectives

Key points

- Terms such as "Team Player" or "Hard-worker" are too generic, avoid buzz words if possible
- Terms such as: "Demonstrated", "Exhibited" or "Observed" show a direct action and subsequent result
- **Be Specific!**

What makes a letter GREAT?

After all, you're only deciding someone's future!

- Great letters of recommendation are **DETAILED!**
- Great letters of recommendation are **INSIGHTFUL!**
- Great letters of recommendation are **PROFESSIONAL!**
- Great letters of recommendation **SHOW STRENGTHS!**

What makes a letter GREAT?

"Amy was on our service for 4 weeks – her first clerkship experience. She was a relatively strong student overall."

OR

"Ms. Smith was in the top 10% of students I have precepted over the past 5 years. During her 4-week rotation with us, she proved to be effective in her role, industrious, and timely – not easy, given that this was her first clerkship."

What **NOT** to include in the letter

- **AVOID** personal remarks
 - Do not mention age, race/ethnicity, marital status, children, physical characteristics, or other personal attributes
 - If you believe this is an important factor in demonstrating the applicant's performance and potential, ask the applicant if he or she wants that information included in the letter
- **AVOID** the misconception that the more superlatives that you use, the stronger the letter
 - Heavy use of stock phrases or clichés in general is unhelpful
- **AVOID** either exaggeration or overly vague/generic descriptors

Appropriate length

- Don't be too brief but be succinct and make every word count!
- The person collecting and reading letters of recommendation is busy and has plenty of other pages to read through
- If you follow the tips we've given you tonight, your letter probably will be somewhere between one and two pages
 - Anything ≥ three pages is counter-productive
 - Anything shorter than a page may imply a lack of interest or knowledge about the applicant

How to address applicant weaknesses

- In describing any weaknesses, consider whether you can frame them positively
 - e.g., "demonstrated improvement in documentation..." rather than "demonstrated poor documentation"
- Adding some minor weaknesses or areas to work on may give more credibility to your letter
- Avoid red flag descriptors
 - "needy", "difficulty getting along with others", "lack of effort"

How to address applicant weaknesses

"Amy may or may not be a high-performing student. She seems to have been effortful on her first rotation, but may have had some difficulty. How she compares to other students is unclear. The team seemed to like her, which is promising."

OR

"Ms. Smith is a hardworking student with an above average knowledge base. A residency would be the perfect place for her to further develop her problem solving skills. I am confident she has the ability to succeed, especially in an environment that provides strong mentorship."

Always proofread



- Carefully proofread your letter
- Remember to spell check
 - Ask for feedback from a trusted colleague who may also know the candidate
- Pay particular attention to the spelling of the applicant's name
- If you are using a template, ensure that you have changed the name throughout the letter
- If you're putting your reputation on the line for the candidate, you want to put your best foot forward
- The letter represents both **YOU** and the **APPLICANT!**

Audience participation

- Have you ever said NO?
- What is the most frustrating thing you've encountered writing a letter?
- How do you address weaknesses?
 - The quiet applicant
 - The applicant who lacks confidence

Helpful phrasing

- Powerful words/phrases
 - Articulate, effective, assertive, innovative, observant, efficient, dependable
 - Great/valuable addition/asset to program
- Intro phrases
 - I am delighted to be called upon as a reference for...
 - I am pleased to write this letter of recommendation for...
- Conclusion phrases
 - I have no hesitation in giving my highest recommendation...
 - I am honored to support...
 - I enthusiastically recommend...
 - I recommend without reservation...

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