



## On the subject of writing letters of recommendation



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Recently, I was charged with coming up with guidelines for distribution to our faculty who were asked to write letters of recommendation on behalf of our medical students applying for residency. Sifting through the literature and resources on this subject quickly uncovered the reality that those who are asked to write such letters are challenged to write an honest letter in support of an individual as that may risk overselling someone who may be an “average” candidate. “Average” is not necessarily a bad thing. An editorial, which appeared some years ago in the *New England Journal of Medicine* by an internist reviewing applications for residency, likened the experience of reviewing letters to a trip through “a fantasy land of sugarplums and fairy tales” where everyone is purportedly perfect; he was frustrated by the fact that several of these supposedly outstanding candidates over the last few years had severe problems in the first few months of their residency [1].

Very little attention is given to or training in how to best navigate this exercise of writing an effective letter. In the current day and age of email and texting, formal letter writing has become a dying art form with which many people have little practice. People are often asked to write letters for individuals they may not have worked with or seen in months or years or whom they feel they barely know. One's reputation is also on the line in recommending someone in a letter, lest they turn out to be not as great as claimed or one is setting them up to be something they are not. Do not exaggerate! Likewise, the letter is not supposed to be a “power trip”. One needs to put one's ego aside in writing the letter; writing a damaging letter for someone because they did not do exactly what one wanted them to do is unprofessional. In a recent dialogue with a colleague, a justifiable concern was expressed about the power differential that often exists between the requestor of the letter and the letter writer and the temptation for some individuals to take advantage of that differential to voluntarily hurt the requestor by writing them a damaging letter, rather than declining to write the letter. A professional letter, like a good assessment, should be objective and based on observed behaviors and not laden with personal feelings and biases. When one does so, one's reputation and credibility as a letter writer and a professional colleague is compromised. Then, there are the legal and confidentiality issues that need to be considered and that dictate what can or cannot be put in writing. One study examining

letters of recommendation to Otolaryngology/Head and Neck Surgery residency programs observed that the gender of the letter writer seemed to impact how applicants were described regardless of the applicant's gender [2]. For example, the study noted that male letter writers were more likely to make reference to a female candidate's physical appearance [2]. Despite these challenges, letters of recommendation still remain a chief component of many application processes. Knowing what should be done (and what should not) as well as how things should be worded in an effective and well-crafted letter is important. What follows are 10 general guidelines to consider.

1. Be clear on whether you are writing a letter of reference or letter of recommendation. A letter of recommendation is focused on the strengths of an individual with deliberate omission of weaknesses - a best foot forward letter, if you will. A letter of reference is more akin to a genuine evaluation, a balanced account of both strengths and potential weaknesses.
2. If you feel that you are unable to write a favorable letter for an individual, then it is best that you inform the individual of that fact and give that person an opportunity to decide to look elsewhere for someone who might be able to do so. One should be honest and authentic in what one writes and comfortable doing so. One should not feel obligated to write a letter on behalf of someone, if one really does not know the person or has not worked with the individual. It is OK to decline writing a letter for someone and not feel guilty about doing so.
3. Do the preparation work beforehand. This in part is the responsibility of the person asking for the letter. Information regarding the purpose of the letter, to whom and where it is going, and any other pertinent information (e.g. curriculum vitae) should be provided. Meeting with the individual to clarify goals and personalize the letter is important. This can also provide an opportunity to explore the individual's performance and their character.
4. Keep the format of the letter formal. Place your address on the top right corner with date. Include the recipient's name (if known) and address. Use a formal business greeting (e.g. Dear Dr., Dear Sir or Madam, To whom it may concern, etc). Use a business closing for the letter (e.g. Sincerely, Best regards, Thank you). Start by briefly

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introducing who you are, what your qualifications are, and in what capacity you have come to know the individual for whom you are writing the letter.

5. Provide information that you would want to know, if you were reading the letter. Focus on characteristics and skills that are relevant and germane to the position the person is seeking. For example, when one is writing a letter on behalf of a medical student applying to residency, think about the residency competencies with which the student, as future resident, will be held accountable for (patient care and procedural skills, systems-based practice, medical knowledge, interprofessional and communication skills, professionalism and practice-based learning and improvement); these are the issues a program director will be interested in. Use objective data when possible and supplement with explanations when needed.
6. Provide details and examples of behaviors and experiences you have had or observed with the individual. This confirms that you know the individual well and provides details supporting and justifying the points you wish to make (see point 5 above). If possible, differentiate this person from others based on their strengths. Stick to observations and present them in an objective fashion. Do not be unduly swayed by emotions, personal prejudices or biases, or by the person who has coddled favor in “gaming the system”.
7. Choose the words you use carefully. There is a tendency to use very positive descriptors in trying to advocate for an individual. There are certain phrases and words that letter readers tend to look for and others that seem to be a flag. Saudek and colleagues in analyzing residency program directors interpretation of letter of recommendation components, identified certain phrases which were viewed more positively than others [3]. Phrases such as “I give my highest recommendation,” “would like the applicant to stay at our institution,” “exceeded expectations,” “I highly recommend,” “will be an asset to any program,” and “I recommend without reservation” were viewed positively by those surveyed in the study [3]. Phrases that were viewed more often in a negative way included “I recommend,” “solid performance,” “showed improvement,” and “performed at the expected level” [3].
8. Be wary of potential legal perspectives that should be considered

[4,5]. Do not disclose information about a person without their written consent. Some scenarios which require letters of recommendation stipulate that the individual waives their right to access and read the letters, thereby reducing liability. Only write things that are truthful and factual. Private information such as medical or health issues should not be disclosed, unless the letter writer has permission to do so beforehand. If there is relevant negative information that the letter writer believes is necessary to include in the letter, then discussing this with the individual and confirming that the individual still wants the letter written despite this is recommended.

9. Close the letter in an affirmative fashion. Make an offer to have the person who receives the letter contact you if there is need for clarification on anything included in the letter. In such conversations, be careful of aforementioned points 7 and 8.
10. Proofread the letter carefully before sending to make sure points 4–9 are all in order.

Letters of recommendation remain an important part of application processes. Crafting a letter that is useful, truthful and fair is a challenge. However, if successful, it can be of tremendous benefit to both the person who requested the letter and the recipient of the letter who has to make a decision.

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Richard A. Prayson\*, Elizabeth E. O’Toole  
 Cleveland Clinic and MetroHealth Medical Center, United States of America  
 E-mail address: [praysor@ccf.org](mailto:praysor@ccf.org) (R.A. Prayson)

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Anatomic Pathology, L25, Cleveland Clinic, 9500 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44195, United States of America.