



Writing Letters of Recommendation

INFORMATION FOR EVALUATORS

The Office of Health Professions Advising is aware of the substantial time commitment involved in writing letters of recommendation, and we would like to thank you for your efforts. As one of a group of letters written on behalf of applicants, yours is essential to the admissions process. A persuasive recommendation letter can have a significant impact on an applicant's candidacy during this competitive process. After reading this material, if you have questions about writing letters or the professional school application process, do not hesitate to contact us at (609) 258-3144, hpa@princeton.edu.

THE BASICS

- Think carefully about how well you know the student or alumnus who is requesting a letter. Do you know him/her well enough to write an endorsement for medical school? If for any reason you do not feel that you can write positively on an applicant's behalf, be honest with him/her and decline to write the letter.
- We advise medical school applicants to provide their evaluators with information about their academic studies, employment history, extracurricular activities, volunteer work, and research (often in the form of a resume) as well as a copy of a past assignment they may have done for you. It may also be helpful for you to see a draft of the autobiography that all applicants write prior to setting up an interview with us in the spring of the year they are applying. Ask for this material if it is not offered and you think it may help you.
- Sit down with the applicant and discuss his/her interest in the field of medicine and reasons for pursuing a medical education.
- **Confidentiality.** While it is the student's or alumnus's right to decide if the letter will remain confidential or non-confidential, we encourage applicants to keep their letters confidential, as only confidential letters are taken seriously by admissions committees. Applicants are asked to sign a waiver as part of the paperwork they complete before interviewing with our office, as well as a waiver statement for each letter.
- **Letters should be on official department or office letterhead, and please, don't forget to sign your letter.** Make sure to use your full name and professional title.

WHAT TO INCLUDE

An author's personal style influences the format for their letters. However, many writers follow a composition similar to the following:

- Note that you would recommend this applicant specifically for medical school (or their specific profession of application). Applicants should not be using letters originally written for another graduate program or award.
- Indicate how long and in what capacity you have known the applicant. Comment on how this applicant compares in intellectual ability or other characteristics to others you have encountered. The more you are able to quantify your praise—"Jane performed in the top 5% in my class of about 200 students," or "John is in the top third of the students I have taught in five years as a faculty"—the better.
- If possible, evaluate the student's potential for becoming the kind of doctor you might like to see in the field. How has the applicant demonstrated a commitment to medicine? Does he/she strike you as a compassionate individual who will make a good doctor some day? Does the student seem familiar with health care?
- Discuss the student's coursework, including the nature of the course(s), difficulty of coursework/ major, grades received, notable work assignments, etc. Clarify any Princeton-specific terms.
- Medical schools are particularly interested in fifteen *core competencies*. If you have specific examples that provide evidence of these competencies, they can be particularly helpful.

- *Thinking and Reasoning Competencies*: critical thinking; quantitative reasoning; scientific inquiry; written communication
- *Science Competencies*: knowledge and skill in the understanding of living systems; understanding of self, others and social systems as they apply to health and well-being
- *Interpersonal Competencies*: service orientation; social skills; cultural competence; teamwork; oral communication
- *Intrapersonal Competencies*: ethical responsibility to self and others; reliability and dependability; resilience and adaptability; capacity for improvement
- Learn more at the AAMC: <https://www.aamc.org/initiatives/admissionsinitiative/letters/>
- Additionally, you may wish to comment on:
 - *Interpersonal skills* including ability to work independently and with peers, response to criticism, leadership, and attitude toward supervision.
 - *Personal qualities*, such as maturity, compassion, empathy, creativity, self-awareness, demonstrated judgment, and initiative.
 - *Special talents*, including any passion, extracurricular activity, or hobby that makes the candidate unique even if not immediately relevant to the practice of medicine. Mention depth of involvement and any accolades earned.
 - *Special academic/personal circumstances*. Circumstances such as dips in grades, incomplete coursework, re-taking the MCAT, and disciplinary actions are all fairly common. Should you feel qualified to do so, you are urged to discuss such situations in your letter.
- You may wish to conclude your letter with a reaffirmation of your endorsement of the applicant's candidacy and offer to answer follow-up questions if necessary.

WHAT TO AVOID

- Do not speculate. Be as specific and factual as possible. Give concrete examples to illustrate your characterizations of the applicant. Base your statements on observations and information obtained through direct contact with the applicant or their school record.
- Avoid discussing an individual's race, religion, national origin, age, disability, sexual orientation, citizenship status, or marital status. Also avoid commenting on an applicant's appearance, family background, health, or other personal circumstances unless they are immediately relevant.
- Applicants should not be asked to write their own letters of recommendation. Having a conversation with an applicant to discuss what information you might highlight based on your work with them is appropriate, but asking them to draft their own letter is not.

LETTERS FROM MULTIPLE WRITERS

- If more than one individual (e.g., two members of a research lab, or a faculty member and preceptor) write a letter together, the pronoun "we" should be used throughout the letter and it should be co-signed, ideally, if possible. However, a letter written only by a preceptor is acceptable to schools as long as the author is a candidate for an advanced degree.

HOW TO SUBMIT YOUR LETTER

- If the student is applying to medical/dental school this year, they may utilize the veCollect online system. You should receive an email from a service called veCollect on behalf of applicants. This secure, web-based system provides easy storage and organization of letters. Other health professions may have their own web-based recommendation portals – applicants should provide you with details.
- If the student is applying in a later year, they should request letters to be emailed to us from on-campus evaluators and sent in paper copy from off-campus evaluators.
- Individual letters are submitted to medical and dental schools through our office in their entirety with no changes save for grammatical/spelling errors or typos.