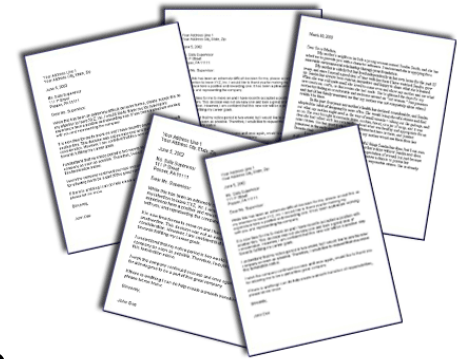


Writing a Letter of Recommendation

American College of Rheumatology
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Penn Medicine

Disclosure

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose

But . . .

My slides did change from the
time I submitted them

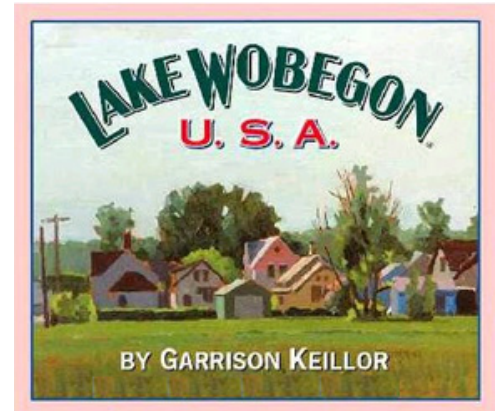
Objectives

1. Understand your **responsibility** when writing a LoR.
2. Understand **essential features** that should be present in a LoR.
3. Be knowledgeable about **common mistakes to avoid** when writing a LoR.
4. **Tailor a LoR** based on performance level.



Fantasy Land

“ A wondrous place . . . Where people have excellent interpersonal skills and about a tenth of the inhabitants are among the finest I have ever worked with, and almost all are in the upper quarter.”



Friedman RB. Fantasy Land. N Engl J Med. 1983;308:651-3



LoR Problems

- Expectations not defined
- No agreement on the adjectives
- Inherent selection bias
- Reliability and validity dubious
- Shortened exposure to trainees



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Scenario 1

Ima Star



Your Responsibility

- Trainee: Help advance as far as s/he can go
- Reader: Provide useful data to select best/appropriate candidate
- Institution/Recruitment: Help get learners to best places possible
- Society/Profession: Gatekeeper to patient safety
- Yourself: Honesty/integrity and your reputation



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Getting Started

- Commit enough time
- Meet with the candidate
- Review candidate's CV/personal statement
- Know what they are applying for/career goals
- Review your evaluation of the candidate
- Decide if it's letter you feel comfortable writing



What Type of Letter are You Writing?

Recommendation

- Constructive criticism
NOT required/expected
- Acceptable to include
your subjective
opinions more than you
would in an evaluation

Performance Evaluation

- Balanced letter
expected
- Example: MSPE



Writing the Letter

- Maintain formal approach in format
- Honesty and authenticity paramount
- Provide information you would want to know
- Discuss relevant and germane skills/characteristics
- Reflect fairness and good faith



Larkin GL. Acad Emerg Med. 2001;8:70-3
Wright SM. JGIM. 2004;19:588-93

Paragraph 1

- Who are you?
- How do you know the trainee?
- In what capacity did you work together?
- Did the trainee waive right to read letter?



Paragraph 1: Example

I have been asked to write this letter of recommendation on behalf of Ima Star. I have been a rheumatologist for 15 years and fellowship director for 5. I have worked with Ima during her two week Rheumatology elective during her fourth year of medical school. During this elective, Ima independently evaluated and presented two new consults daily in addition to two follow-up presentations. As such, I feel as though I am able to accurately comment on her capabilities. Ima has waived her right to view this letter.

Paragraph 1: Example

*It is with utmost
enthusiasm that I write*

I have been asked to write this letter of recommendation on behalf of Imma Star. I have been a rheumatologist for 10 years and have been a clinical research director for 5. I have worked with Imma Star for 5 years as a 12-week Rheumatology elective during her fourth year of medical school. During this elective, Imma independently evaluated and presented two new consults daily in addition to two follow-up presentations. As such, I feel as though I am able to accurately comment on her capabilities. Imma has waived her right to view this letter.

*It is with great pleasure
that I write*

Paragraph 1: Example

*It is with utmost
enthusiasm that I write*

*I have been asked to write this letter of recommendation
on behalf of Dr. Star. I have been a rheumatologist for
relationship director for 5. I have worked with
week Rheumatology elective during
her fourth year of medical school. During this elective,
Ima independently evaluated and presented two new
consults daily in addition to two follow-up presentations.
As such, I feel as though I am able to accurately comment
on her capabilities. **Ima has waived her right to view this
letter.***

Legal Issues Surrounding LoR

- FERPA
- Right to Privacy
- Defamation
- Qualified Privilege
- Negligent Referral



Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA)

- Federal law protects privacy of **student** education records
- Applies to students at schools receiving funds from the U.S. Department of Education
- Gives students the right to consent to the disclosure of their “educational record” by the institution or its employees prior to its disclosure
- Universities cannot disclose personally identifiable education records of a student or former students to third parties without prior written consent



LoR and FERPA

- Letters of recommendation are considered an education record if
 - faculty writes that letter in his/her role as a faculty member
 - if letter is about student's tenure at the University
- Provides students with the right of access to LoR and their complete applicant file



Waiving FERPA

- Majority of schools ask (some require) students to waive access to LoR
- Once waived, student has no right to review LoR
- Explicitly state in your letter that the student has made written waiver
- No specific laws applicable for residents/fellows
 - BUT: most programs/employers prefer trainee waives the right to review letter



Paragraph 2

- Describe skills
 - Medical knowledge
 - Patient care
 - Technical skills
 - Research skills
- Focus on performance relevant to your experience with the candidate
- Focus on skills relevant to the position sought



Paragraph 3

- Interpersonal skills
- Professionalism
- Character
- Work ethic
- Sense of responsibility
- Communication skills
- Personality
- Fit between role and environment



“Without integrity, motivation is dangerous;
Without motivation, capacity is impotent;
Without capacity, understanding is limited;
Without understanding; knowledge is meaningless;
Without knowledge, experience is blind”

Dee Hock
Founder and CEO Emeritus VISA

Remember

- Be specific
- Quantify and compare
- Make it memorable
 - Personal attributes/special interests that make candidate unique
- Beware of what you leave out



Use Impact Words

Efficient
Highly organized
Effective

Dedicated
Committed
Motivated

Intelligent

Confident
Self-assured

Empathic
Humanistic
Mature
Sincere

Team Player
Collaborative

Articulate
Observant

Leader
Integrity

Enthusiastic
Initiative
Self-directed



Paragraph 4

- Bottom line recommendation
- Overall fit for the position/institution/program
- Offer for contact



Example

Compared to the other students I have worked with in my 15 years as an attending on the consult service, Ima is outstanding (top 10%). I wholeheartedly recommend her to your residency program without any reservations. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you desire additional information.



Example

Compared to the other students I have worked with in my 15 years of attending on the consult service and enthusiastically standing (top 10%). I wholeheartedly recommend her to your residency program without any reservations. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you desire additional information. We will actively be recruiting her to our program.



The Secret Language

Rank Words

- Outstanding
- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Solid
- Appropriate for level of training

Recommend

- Wholeheartedly
- Enthusiastically
- Without reservation
- With confidence
- With comfort
- Strongly
- With reservation
- Do not recommend



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Common Mistakes

- Too short or too long
- Grammatical errors, spelling, “cut and “paste”
- Gender bias



Common Mistakes: Letters that Hurt

- No specific examples
- Undersells the candidate
 - *“When asked clinical questions she typically knew the answers. Her skills seemed appropriate or advanced for her level.”*
 - *“She has very good interpersonal skills and her professionalism is solid.”*
- Reiterates information available elsewhere
- Excessive focus on how the writer knows the applicant without describing applicant’s accomplishments



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Troubleshooting the “Problem Letter”



When Bad Students Ask For
Letters of Recommendation

Scenario 2

Justin Soso



Vulnerability of Letter Writer

- You write a stronger letter than is deserved
- You give ½ truths/ fail to disclose whole truth
- You write truthful criticisms and fear repercussion



When You Can't Write A Great Letter

- Highlight the strengths
- Highlight previous successes
 - Repeat details from CV/academic record
- Put interpersonal skills (3rd paragraph) as 2nd paragraph for more academically weak candidates



When You Can't Write a Great Letter

- Focus on what was accomplished EVEN if accomplishments were expected

“Justin was punctual and always read about his patients.”

- Note impressive improvements/response to feedback

“Over the course of his time with me, Justin developed more sophisticated differential diagnoses and plans for his patients.”

“It took awhile for Justin to get his research projects started, but he now has an oral abstract and a poster presentation, and I think going forward he will make important contributions to the field.”



When You Have NOTHING Nice to Say

- Seriously consider saying no
- Disclose beforehand
- Limit criticism to one paragraph late in letter
- Phrase criticism affirmatively



Examples

“Her teaching will improve once she gains a higher level of confidence....”

“His fund of knowledge will improve as he continues to read about his patients....”

“I’m confident that her interpersonal skills will improve as she gains more experience working on a team....”

“He readily accepts and incorporates feedback regarding his need to work on....”



When to Say No

- You cannot write a letter positive enough to be helpful
- You have little or no recollection of the applicant
 - NOTE: Can be remedied by
 - Keep copy of all evaluations
 - Keep copies of presentations
 - Ask during your meeting
 - Who was your most memorable patient?
 - What accomplishment in the lab/on service are you most proud of?



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Right to Privacy

- Specific areas prohibited from disclosure such as medical information, age, race, national origin, marital status, religion, disability



Scenario 3

Reale Cantscope



Options

- A) Be completely honest. Describe Reale's strengths and weaknesses. (*And worry you could be liable for writing an unfavorable letter*).
- B) Write a letter that omits Reale's weaknesses. (*And worry you could be held liable for writing a favorable letter*).
- C) Tell Reale the letter wouldn't serve her interests. She should seek a letter from another source.



Defamation

- Verbal (slander) or written (libel) communication
 - Injures reputation, ability, character of another
 - Is received by a third party
 - Is untrue, substantially untrue, or communicated without regard to truth or falsity
 - Causes damages to a person
- Defenses
 - Truth of statement
 - Consent to release of information
 - Protection by qualified privilege



Qualified Privilege

- Negative employment references may not be legally actionable if communication is
 - Based upon evaluation of person's work and ability
 - Made by someone with knowledge of person's work/ ability
 - Limited to information which is job specific
 - Disclosed to prospective employers to satisfy legitimate business needs
 - Not done with malice or intentional harm
 - Verified to be accurate prior to its disclosure



Negligent Referral

- You have a duty to exercise reasonable care when referring a student for employment
- If you know of issues that would make the potential employee dangerous and fail to provide this information to the prospective employer, the employer could bring an action against you for negligent referral.

Legal Recommendations

- Don't disclose information without written permission
- Ask trainee to waive right to access
- Only share factual, truthful statements made in good faith
- Never disclose private (i.e. medical) information
- Advise individual if pertinent negative information needs to be conveyed
- Review negative comments to make sure they are accurate and factual



Top 10 List for Effective Letters

1. Authentic: based on adequate 1st hand knowledge of the candidate's skills
2. Honest: accurate; avoid exaggeration or hyperbole
3. Explicit: highlight what you can to be helpful
4. Provide specific examples to support praise
5. Confidential: avoid unnecessary disclosure
6. Of appropriate detail and length: content relevant to the institutional or individual requests
7. Technically clear: avoid unnecessary jargon
8. Use the right code words
9. Personalized: Remember to tailor comments for the applicant
10. PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD!!



Questions/Discussion