

THE EFFECTIVE MEDICAL SCHOOL LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

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Why Letters of Recommendation?



“Our goal is to select the most capable students to attend our school and to have a balanced, but heterogeneous group that will excel in both the art and science of medicine.” (*Admissions Committee Training Manual 20008-2009, pg. 3*)

Selection Criteria



- GPA
- MCAT
 - ▣ Verbal Reasoning
 - ▣ Biological Science
 - ▣ Physical Science
- MCAT and GPA each contribute 10% to final selection
 - ▣ Committee members do not see test scores or GPA

Selection Criteria



- ☐ Extracurricular Activities
- ☐ Community/Volunteer Service
- ☐ Leadership Ability
- ☐ Research
- ☐ Physician Shadowing
- ☐ Patient Exposure

Candidates must participate in each area of activity.
The selection process focuses more on what has been learned than what was done

The Secret to Selection



“It’s not what you do, it’s what you learn from what you do that makes the difference”

Characteristics of a Strong Letter



□ Content

- ▣ The letter should tell us about the candidate, not about the letter writer
- ▣ Don't repeat what can be found elsewhere in the application
- ▣ Stick to what you know about the candidate

□ Length

- ▣ Be complete, but concise. The average interviewer will read 90-120 letters each year.

Characteristics of a Strong Letter

- Relationship to the applicant clearly stated
 - ▣ Taught him/her in class
 - ▣ S/he worked in my lab
 - ▣ Your letter is most effective if you know the candidate well ***in the context in which you are recommending him or her***
 - Letters from neighbors, family members, etc., are usually not effective
 - Do not make statements or give assessments that are outside of your personal interaction and experience with the candidate

Your Expertise and Observations are Important to Us

- “John is one of the most capable chemistry students I have known in 20 years of teaching the subject”
- “John’s determination, integrity and humility set him apart from his classmates”
- “While he is clearly not a mathematician, John worked hard to master the material, and when he had done so, he saw to it that those around him learned it as well. Our class was better because he was in it.”

Less Helpful Information



- “Miriam comes from a family of accomplished musicians”
- “Hyrum comes from a very distinguished family”
- “Adam’s father is a member of the legislature”
- “Barbara’s grandfather is an important contributor to your development fund”
- “I consider my course to be a reliable indicator of a student’s potential for a successful career in medical school and in the practice of medicine”

A Common Occurrence



“It is a real pleasure to recommend Daniel as a candidate for admission to your dental school. He was one of the top students in my organic chemistry course.”

(Later in the same letter)

“I know that William will be an excellent physician and I recommend him highly.”

(The applicant’s name was Steven)

Another Common Occurrence



“Because I want my recommendations to mean something, I will only write letters for my very best students. Donald Duck has distinguished himself as a student in my Advanced Statistical methods class. His will be the only letter of recommendation I will write this year.”

Another Common Occurrence, cont'd



“Because I want my recommendations to mean something, I will only write letters for my very best students. Michael Mouse has distinguished himself as a student in my Introduction to Medical Anthropology class. His will be the only letter of recommendation I will write this year.”

(Donald and Michael were presented to the committee on the same day)

Avoid Contradiction



“Leonard was frequently late, and his assignments were often messy and difficult to read. His participation in class was inconsistent and he was occasionally disruptive. His test scores placed him in the bottom third of the class.”

“I recommend him highly and with enthusiasm as a candidate for medical school.”

Inconsistencies are Problematic



“Estelle is a fundamentally good and bright person, but I found that she lacked initiative and the intellectual capacity to succeed in the laboratory”

In her application, Estelle indicated that she had submitted a manuscript from work done in this lab. Our literature search turned up two peer reviewed articles where she was listed as a principle author and the letter writer was listed as the senior author.

Candor is Important

- We take every possible measure to assure that applicant files remain confidential
- “Feel free to call me” is code for “I would like to talk to you about this recommendation”
- If there is important information that we should know about an applicant that you hesitate to put in writing, feel free to contact me directly
 - ▣ Admissions office: (800) 444-8638, ext 17498
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 - ▣ University Hospital Operator: (801) 581-2121

Recommendations



- ❑ Don't overwhelm yourself by trying to write too many letters
- ❑ Include information based on your personal interaction with the applicant
- ❑ Don't include information that will be found elsewhere in the application
- ❑ Be consistent and accurate
- ❑ Please include your faculty designation
- ❑ Feel free to contact us at any time

Questions?

