

Guidelines for Letter Writers

When writing a letter of recommendation (or evaluation) it is most helpful to provide as much personal and anecdotal information as you can with the admissions committee. Usually applicants will share their transcript, test scores, and a résumé and/or curriculum vitae, so re-iterating these aspects is not necessary unless you can provide greater meaning and insight to those areas. Some types of schools and programs may have specific characteristics and/or experiences of which they may want you to discuss. The applicant should provide this information if applicable. For example, many medical schools have specific competencies they want references to address. See attached handout.

When writing, remember to use official letterhead and sign the letter with your signature. It is also helpful to address the letter generally instead of to a specific school, for example, "Dear Medical School Admissions Committee".

Most importantly, many schools and programs have submission deadlines. Please be aware of these and make sure that you submit your letter before the deadline. If you do not do so, the applicant may not be able to be considered for admissions.

Suggested Topics for Letters of Recommendation or Evaluation

One should address topics you have observed or know well and for which you can give specific examples as evidence. The more concrete your examples, the better.

Personal knowledge of the student: Provide context both for your knowledge of the applicant and for his/her performance

- How long and in what capacity you have known the applicant
- How well you know the applicant
- How the applicant compares to others you have known, past and present
- How well your applicant performed in your course(s)/employment/etc. (beyond a grade)
- How difficult your course(s)/employment/etc. is and why

Intellectual readiness and academic ability: How well do you think this applicant will handle professional school

- General intellectual ability
- Ability to learn and retain information
- Oral communication skills
- Written communication skills
- Ability to deal with complex and abstract ideas
- Ability to handle ambiguity
- Critical thinking skills
- Problem analysis and problem-solving abilities
- Creativity
- Evidence of interest in the course(s) subject matter
- Evidence of being a lifelong learner
- Evidence of initiative and the ability to work independently
- Laboratory skills and techniques
- Research skills

Motivation and suitability for the profession: Do you think this applicant will thrive in this profession?

- Exposure to the realities of the profession
- Understanding of the profession
- Understanding of current issues affecting the profession
- Evidence of commitment to public service
- Suitability for the profession

Personal characteristics and evidence of: Is this someone you would trust to care for you or a loved one? Please share any observations that will illuminate the applicant's strengths and weaknesses

- Maturity
- Leadership
- Moral/ethical integrity
- Law-abiding behavior
- Social skills
- Responsibility and dependability
- Empathy and altruism
- Sincerity and dedication
- Tolerance for diversity
- Personal initiative
- Overall potential

Remember it is not about quantity but quality and remember to show not tell. Please note that use of these guidelines is optional. They are intended to help you think about your letter and facilitate the writing process. It is not expected to provide information about every characteristic listed above, only those in which you can portray the applicant to the best of your ability.

Thank you for agreeing to write a letter of evaluation for a medical school applicant!

The following guidelines aim to improve the letter writing process in order to benefit both letter writers and admissions committees. They are organized into two sections that describe (1) **tips about how to write a letter** and (2) **key areas of interest to medical schools**.

How to use the guidelines

Please note that use of these guidelines is **optional**. They are intended to help you think about your letter and facilitate the writing process.

Medical schools do not expect any one letter writer to provide information about every characteristic of an applicant. In fact, they require multiple letters specifically because no one letter writer is expected to know everything about an applicant.

A Special Note for Writers of Committee Letters

Medical schools value committee letters because they provide an integrated and institutional perspective on an applicant's readiness for medical school. They provide a comprehensive evaluation of applicants based on direct observation and the synthesis of information provided by faculty and others at an institution. This integrated perspective provides unique and valuable information about applicants.

While we recognize that many committee letters already incorporate the concepts included in these guidelines and key areas of interest, we believe that the material provided here can only complement the current committee letter process by enhancing its effectiveness. Those who work with individual letter writers can use these guidelines and key areas of interest as educational tools to encourage greater focus in individual letters. Writers of committee letters may also wish to re-fashion the overarching committee letter produced by their school to more closely reflect the central points provided here.

Guidelines for Writing a Letter of Evaluation for a Medical School Applicant

Admissions Initiative

Additional Information

For more information on the AAMC admissions initiative:

<http://www.aamc.org/ai>

For more information about holistic admissions and mission-based efforts to promote diversity, visit the Holistic Review Project website:

<https://www.aamc.org/initiatives/holisticreview/>

Guidelines

Key Areas of Interest

1. Provide an accurate assessment of the applicant's suitability for medical school rather than advocate for the applicant.
2. Briefly explain your relationship with the applicant:
 - how long you have known the applicant;
 - in what capacity you have interacted (e.g., faculty, pre-medical advisor, supervisor, etc.); and
 - whether you are writing based on direct or indirect observations.
3. Quality is more important than letter length. Focus on the applicant rather than details about the lab, course, assignment, job or institution.
4. **Only** include information on grades, GPA or MCAT scores **if** you are providing context to help interpret them. Grades, GPA, and MCAT scores are available within the application.
5. Focus on behaviors that you have observed directly when describing applicants' suitability for medical school. Consider describing:
 - The situation or context of the behavior
 - The actual behavior(s) you observed
 - Any consequences of that behavior
6. Admissions committees find comparison information helpful. If you make comparisons, be sure to provide context. Include information about:
 - the comparison group (e.g., students in a class you taught, students in your department, co-workers, etc.)
 - your rationale for the final comparison

Interpersonal Competencies

Service Orientation: Demonstrates a desire to help others and sensitivity to others' needs and feelings; demonstrates a desire to alleviate others' distress; recognizes and acts on his/her responsibilities to society, locally, nationally, and globally

Social Skills: Demonstrates awareness of others' needs, goals, feelings, and the ways social and behavioral cues affect peoples' interactions and behaviors; adjusts behaviors appropriately in response to these cues; and treats others with respect

Cultural Competence: Demonstrates knowledge of social and cultural factors that affect interactions and behaviors; shows an appreciation and respect for multiple dimensions of diversity; recognizes and acts on the obligation to inform one's own judgment; engages diverse and competing perspectives as a resource for learning, citizenship, and work; recognizes and appropriately addresses bias in themselves and others; interacts effectively with people from diverse backgrounds

Teamwork: Works collaboratively with others to achieve shared goals; shares information & knowledge with others and provides feedback; puts team goals ahead of individual goals

Oral Communication: Effectively conveys information to others using spoken words and sentences; listens effectively; recognizes potential communication barriers and adjusts approach or clarifies information as needed

Intrapersonal Competencies

Ethical Responsibility to Self and Others: Behaves in an honest and ethical manner; cultivates personal and academic integrity; adheres to ethical principles and follows rules and procedures; resists peer pressure to engage in unethical behavior and encourages others to behave in honest and ethical ways; and develops and demonstrates ethical and moral reasoning

Reliability and Dependability: Consistently fulfills obligations in a timely and satisfactory manner; takes responsibility for personal actions and performance

Resilience and Adaptability: Demonstrates tolerance of stressful or changing environments or situations and adapts effectively to them; is persistent, even under difficult situations; recovers from setbacks

Capacity for Improvement: Sets goals for continuous improvement and for learning new concepts and skills; engages in reflective practice for improvement; solicits and responds appropriately to feedback

A.) Unique Contributions to the Incoming Class

- Describe obstacles that the applicant had to overcome, and if applicable, how those obstacles led to new learning and growth
- Explain how the applicant may contribute to a medical school's diversity, broadly defined (e.g., background, attributes, experiences, etc.)

Note. If you write about any information that could be considered potentially sensitive, confirm with the applicant that s/he is comfortable with the inclusion of that information.

B.) Core, Entry-level Competencies

Describe how the applicant has, or has not, demonstrated **any** of the following competencies that are necessary for success in medical school.

Thinking & Reasoning Competencies

Critical Thinking: Uses logic and reasoning to identify the strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions, conclusions, or approaches to problems

Quantitative Reasoning: Applies quantitative reasoning and appropriate mathematics to describe or explain phenomena in the natural world

Scientific Inquiry: Applies knowledge of the scientific process to integrate and synthesize information, solve problems and formulate research questions and hypotheses; is facile in the language of the sciences and uses it to participate in the discourse of science and explain how scientific knowledge is discovered and validated

Written Communication: Effectively conveying information to others using written words and sentences

Science Competencies

Living Systems: Applies knowledge and skill in the natural sciences to solve problems related to molecular and macro systems

Human Behavior: Applies knowledge of the self, others, and social systems to solve problems related to the psychological, social, and biological factors that influence health and well-being

Tips for Writing Composite Letters of Recommendation

OVERVIEW:

Letters of recommendation are one of the many important factors in getting an interview at a health professions school. Here at the University of Maine, we require candidates applying to schools for medicine, dentistry, and optometry to request 3 to 5 individual letters of recommendation to be used when writing a composite letter of recommendation. (At least one of the letters should be from a professional in the field that the student is applying to such as an MD, DO, DDS, etc.) The letters of recommendation should be sent directly to the Health Professions Office. A composite letter of recommendation will be drafted using direct quotes from the primary letters. The composite is written on behalf of the student and it is the official letter from the University's Health Professions Committee. Faculty members from various departments write composite letters. There is no standard format. Styles vary depending upon personal preference of the writer. This tip sheet is only a guide.

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

Generally, writers use some opening statement regarding the letter being in support of the candidate (include full name & application ID number) and that it is the official letter of the Health Professions Committee.

Here are a couple of sample introductions:

Dear Director of Admissions:

This letter is in support of the application of Jane Doe (application ID # 12345678) for admission into your program. It is the official letter from the Health Professions Committee of the University of Maine. This committee includes the following materials in its evaluation: letters of recommendation from persons outside the committee who have known the student, a review of the student's credentials, and several informal interviews with the individual.

Dear Admissions Committee:

On behalf of the Health Professions Committee at the University of Maine, I am delighted to submit this composite letter supporting the application of Joe Black (AAMC ID #12345678) to your M.D. degree program. I am Joe's academic advisor and he was a student in my XYZ course. Joe performed extremely well in class ranking X in a class of XX students. In a large class of students, you very rarely get to know any of the students well, but Joe distinguished himself during our class discussions. He actively participated and I was very impressed with both his ease in communicating his thoughts and his insights into the topics of discussion. While talking with Joe about his application to medical school, he has continued to impress me with his confidence, his ease in talking with others and his maturity. He is confident in his career choice and I think his maturity comes from his nature but also from the path he has taken to arrive at this point....

BODY OF THE LETTER:

There are several options for incorporating the individual letters of recommendations into the composite. Two common methods are to either quote verbatim the individual letters or to weave in multiple quotes from the letters while blending in your own assessment of the candidate.

***Option 1: Using the letters directly or portions of them**

After the standard introduction, the writer typically explains how he/she has gotten to know the individual and offers a brief review of their credentials. (Remember that the schools already have GPA, transcripts, and the student's personal statement so try to avoid repetition.) The writer then moves into the comments from the other faculty and the outside writers who support the student's candidacy.

A letter might read something like this...

A number of individuals have written in support of Jane's candidacy for medical school. Dr. Robert Johnson, M.D., and professor of Chemistry at University XYZ has worked with Jane on her Doctoral research. He writes:

"It is my pleasure to write a letter of support for Ms. Jane Doe on behalf of her application to medical school. I have known Jane for approximately four years and I must say that she has impressed me with her fierce determination, and her intellectual inquisitiveness...."

Note: The author includes the writer's full name and his/her credentials. The rest of the paragraph(s) could be the entire letter or a portion of it unedited.

The author would then write a few sentences commenting on one of Jane's skills, qualities, attributes, etc. to transition into the next individual letter of recommendation. In other words, you would be pasting in chunks of the individual letters and finding ways to make the letter flow from one recommender to another.

Ms. Susan Smith, Manager of Volunteer Services at ABC Hospital, where Jane volunteered, comments on the commitment she showed in her tasks:

Jane Doe has worked as a volunteer on Sundays on our I.V. Station with tasks like organizing labels and delivery samples, answering phones, keeping work order books current, greeting patients, and doing pick-up/delivery from patient floors.

Ms. Doe has been a loyal and committed volunteer since 1998 and has trained new volunteers for our department with enthusiasm and adeptness. She has been an asset to our volunteer staff and I feel she would make a fine physician....

The composite letter is then drafted using all or the majority of the letters in any order the writer conceptualizes.

***Option 2: Incorporating comments from many individual letters on particular topics**

This method may take more time, but it tends to create a personal view of the candidate. After careful review of the individual letters, the author pulls out comments from various writers on particular topics. These topics might include:

- academic talent (choice of major/ courses if unusual)
- knowledge of the profession they are pursuing (job shadow experience)
- career goals & decision making
- communication skills/ interpersonal skills
- personal attributes (why the candidate would be suited to medicine/dentistry...)
- commitment to community (volunteer/service)

Rather than quoting the entire letter or large portions of individual letters of recommendation, the composite letter writer uses shorter quotes such as:

Academically, John has uniformly impressed the faculty in our department. His first-year advisor Sally Brown¹ writes, *"He immediately impressed me as a highly motivated and hard-working young man."*

Dr. Smith², Professor of Biology writes, *"He is one of the best candidates for medical school that I have recommended in several years. His conduct enthusiasm, performance, and participation in class have been impressive, and I feel confident in making exceptionally strong judgements about his prospects. I would place him in the top 2% of the undergraduates that I have had over 20 years. John is constantly probing with insightful questions."*²

His instructor for Biochemistry laboratory, Dr. Charlie Brown³ writes, *"He was the one student...who assumed the leadership responsibility. John has great interest in science and pursues the things he doesn't understand tenaciously until he does understand them. He is able to inspire with associates to do the same."*³

The author would then go on to weave his/her own assessment as well as the comments of the other writers into one recommendation. Rather than using the whole letter at once, portions of it are used throughout and citations are made so the reader knows what source the material comes from.

CONCLUSION:

Typically, the conclusion is brief (about a paragraph) and the author says something like (two examples):

In summary, all recommendations, including my own, are in full agreement that Jane is a special individual whose talents would be put to excellent use as a physician. We recommend her most highly for your consideration. If I may provide you with any additional information, please do not hesitate to call me at 207-581-0000.

In summary, it is clear that all the referees and I are agreement that John Doe is a well-qualified candidate for a medical career, based on academic aptitude, personality, and demonstrated scientific skill. We recommend him without reservation.

It is also important to note that word choice can convey a great deal about the quality of a candidate (e.g. exceptional vs. well-qualified OR highly recommend vs. recommend).

For those writers who use a notation system for indicating where the quoted material comes from you may want to say...

The original letters quoted in this composite are on file at the University of Maine Office of Health Professions. Individuals quotes are:

1. Sally Brown, Professor of Zoology, Department of Biological Sciences, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469
2. Jason Smith, Professor of Biology, Department of Biological Sciences, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469
3. Susan Smith, Manager of Volunteer Services, Eastern Maine Medical Center, 489 State Street, Bangor, ME 04401

PLEASE REMEMBER TO:

- Include the students name and application ID # on **each** page of the composite in a header
- Number the pages.
- Leave at least a three-inch margin on the first page to allow for school addresses, which vary in length.
- Write and send letter on a letterhead; it adds more to the composite letter.
- Indicate in the introduction that this is a composite letter and is the official letter of the Health Professions Committee at University of Maine **even** if you are not a member of the committee. (You are writing on behalf of the committee).
- Use your full name and title below your signature & leave a telephone number for the admissions committee to contact you if necessary.
- State in the composite that the original letters are on file in the Office of Health Professions (in rare cases they may request to have copies sent).
- Use at least 10-point font. Also, some schools have a page limit (4 pages) and others have no limit but lengthy letters are not necessarily better letters.

HOW IT ALL WORKS:

The student is expected to meet with you (in person) to talk about having you write a composite letter. He or she should provide you all the materials in his or her file (letters of rec, transcript, list of schools, personal statement, etc.). Once you have these materials and have met with the student in person, you're ready to begin drafting the letter. The Health Professions Office will submit the composite letter via a virtual evaluation system. The letter will be submitted as a pdf so we need to have an electronic signature of the author.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact
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