

Tips for Writing Letters of Recommendation

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University of Washington, Updated 2016

Basics for Residency LORs:

- Put the student's ERAS ID number on it at least once (e.g., "I am pleased to recommend Bob Smith (ERAS 123456) for a position in your residency program).
- State that the student has waived the right to see the letter.
- Print it on letterhead. Include your personal contact info (email below your signature line).
- SIGN THE LETTER.

Intro:

- Who are you? What is your teaching role? If you work with lots of students, say so. THIS SHOULD BE KEPT VERY BRIEF – 1-2 sentences max.
- What is this letter recommending the student for? Be specific to the residency specialty. (Note: students may ask for separate, specific letters if they are applying in more than one discipline.)
- How well do you know the student? How long did you work with them? In what context?

Body:

- Describe the student's strengths that you observed. Be as generous and specific as you can. Use active language (see page 2 for examples). Clinical skills are most highly valued, so comment favorably on those if you can - if not, be effusive in the areas that make you feel the student is a good applicant. Include language that addresses the values of the specialty to which the student is applying.
- Describe other aspects to the student that make them unique: any special accomplishments in any domain can count. Service, research, and leadership are particularly valuable, but other activities are, too. Link this back to how these special skills make them a better clinician. Reading the student's CV can be very helpful for this part.
- Please don't call students "Dr." unless they have earned a PhD. Student doctor, Mr./Ms., or first names are acceptable.

Summary:

- **This may be the only paragraph that they read.**
- Recap student's strengths and what sets them apart.
- If you would want them in your own residency, say so.

Comparative statements (optional, but often valued by residencies)

- Best student in xx years, top xx%
- Recommend "strongly, highly, strongest, highest" "without reservation"
- Amazing, extraordinary, superb, outstanding, great, excellent

Other tips/guidelines:

- The best letter of recommendation is short enough to read (1 page) but detailed enough to make the student distinctive. The goal should be for the reader to choose this student over others with similar credentials, so show them why they're special.
- Do not agree to write a letter for a student if you cannot honestly give a strong recommendation.
- Letters that are effusive or positive in excess of what the student deserves will ultimately hurt future students, as your letters will be considered by program directors to be unreliable. Similarly, using the same praise for every student will make your letters less valuable.
- Brief anecdotes are helpful. Avoid quoting evaluations.
- Avoid any language that makes the student sound average: "competent", "solid", "good".
- Avoid saying that students "improved"; this implies they were bad to begin with and is frequently used as code for a less-stellar performance overall.
- Avoid damning with faint praise: saying a student is "reliable", "punctual", or a "hard worker" without praising clinical skills looks bad. If the student's greatest strengths are in these areas, tell an anecdote that shows why they're special.
- If you feel strongly about a student, a personal note to a program director counts for more than a letter of recommendation—especially if they know you. You can't do this often, but for occasional students it can mean a lot.

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The “5 C’s” of Good Letters – Ken Steinberg, MD and Christ Knight, MD

Concise – 1 page or less, program directors frequently start with the last paragraph.

Credible – What experience do you have with students? Be honest and generous.

Contextual – Where/when did you work with the student? What are their strengths in this context?

Concrete – Be as specific and descriptive as possible. Brief anecdotes are great; watch the length.

Comparative – How does this student compare to others you’ve taught? Would you want this student in your practice?

Buzz Words

Adjectives:		Verbs:
Accountable	Initiative	Analyze
Accurate	Inquisitive	Apply
Ambitious	Intellectual	Construct
Analytical	Kind	Create
Articulate	Likable	Demonstrate
Assertive	Methodical	Design
Attentive	Motivated	Display
Calm	Organised	Employ
Capable	Outgoing	Exhibit
Compassionate	Outstanding	Explain
Dedicated	Patience	Express
Determined	Personable	Evaluate
Devoted	Pleasant	Formulate
Eager	Resourceful	Generate
Enthusiastic	Respectful/respected	Illustrate
Ethical	Responsible	Instruct
Excellent	Steady	Interpret
Flexible	Systematic	Operate
Friendly	Tactful	Persevere
Good judgement	Thoughtful	Prepare
Good knowledge	Trustworthy	Relate
Integrity	Well-read	Show
Humorous	Willing	Synthesize
Independent		Value

The following is a **sample introductory paragraph**:

It is my pleasure to recommend student _____ (ERAS #) for consideration for your residency program. I am a Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of Family Medicine at the University Of ABC School Of Medicine and have been a regional attending physician in a teaching capacity for X years. I had the opportunity to work closely with _____ during her six week Family Medicine clerkship and was able to directly observe her clinical skills.