Letter of Recommendation: Faculty Guide

So you’ve been asked to write a Letter of Recommendation for a student. Now what?

1. Background

Most students need 3-4 letters of recommendation to apply to residency. For Family Medicine, students generally need to elicit a separate letter from 3 preceptors, including at least one from a Family Medicine preceptor. The Family Medicine Department does not write a Department Letter. Most programs will only review 3 letters, but sometimes students will collect more than 3 letters so that they can customize which letters go to which programs. For example, if they are applying to a rural program, they might attach a letter from a rural preceptor who can speak to their community engagement efforts. If they’re applying to a program strong in Global Health, they may attach a letter from a rotation they did abroad**. Make sure you understand why the student is asking you for this letter, and clarify if there is anything in particular they are hoping you will highlight for them.** It can also be helpful to collect some information from the student:

* Specialty they are applying to
* Copy of their resume/CV
* Personal statement
* If you are at an institution who writes group evaluations for rotations, consider getting a copy of the evaluation your clinic/inpatient service wrote for the student
* Clarify what the student is hoping your letter will contribute to their application. This might just be “I need a family medicine letter”, or it might be something more specific such as “I want you to speak to my social justice efforts”, etc.
* Some other questions to consider asking the student that may help guide your letter writing:
	+ Why are they going into family medicine?
	+ Why do they want to practice medicine?
	+ What do they hope to do long term?
	+ What do they do in their free time?
	+ Any patients/memories the student has from your time working together?
1. Deadlines
* Generally ERAS is due mid-to-late September. Most students will get very very anxious if your letter is coming in close to this deadline. Ask your student by what date they would like the letter completed. This gives you a bit of buffer if you have a personal emergency or other delay. **If your letter is one of the student’s core three letters, and it is not in their file by the ERAS deadline, their application will be considered incomplete and it can impact their ability to get interviews.**
1. What to include
* Address letter to “Dear Program Director”
* Include student’s ERAS ID#
* How long and in what capacity you know the student
	+ Did you work with them clinically? On research? In a non-clinical/other capacity?
	+ Did you work with them longitudinally and see them grow over several years? If over a significant amount of time, make sure to still quantify how much time you actually spent together
	+ Did you work with them intensely over a short period of time such as an Acting Internship or core clerkship?
* Include specific examples of student performance
	+ Exceptional patient care
	+ Exceptional presentation skills (either presentation on a patient or presentation to your clinic/inpatient service)
	+ Exceptional teaching/learning
	+ Skills applicable to chosen specialty (i.e. procedural skills, counseling skills, calm under pressure, communication, leadership, etc)
* If possible, include a percentage to demonstrate where the student falls (i.e. top 10% of students you have worked with, top quartile, top 5%, etc)
* If student was not particularly strong, you can use words such as “demonstrated significant improvement in x, y z”, “improved greatly over our rotation in a, b, c ways”
* Include information about who you are, how long you have worked with students, and any academic appointments or titles
* Print on letterhead
* If at all possible, print letter, include a real signature, and the scan to upload
* Limit to 1-2 pages (some thought that going onto the second page might make it a stronger letter)
* Avoid including student’s race, marital status, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical characteristics etc unless you have discussed this with the student and feel it is relevant to the letter itself
* Include contact information if you are comfortable
1. Avoiding Bias

We all have bias. This has been particularly studied around letters for male versus female students. For example, letters for men are 4 times more likely to include publications and letters for women are 7 times more likely to include details about personal/home life. Letters for men are more likely in include information about accomplishments (“research”, “career”, etc) while letters about women are more likely to include “grindstone” adjectives describing effort (i.e. “hardworking”). How do we counteract this?

* Try using a bias checking app such as this one to scan your letter for bias: <http://slowe.github.io/genderbias/>
* Read the resources listed below to aid in avoiding specific gendered/biased language
* Re-read your letter and “proofread” for places where you may be using biased language
1. How to submit

Once you have agreed to write a letter for the student, and ERAS has opened (usually in June), the student will enter your name and email address into his/her/their ERAS application, triggering an email to you. This email will contain a link to upload your letter, complete with the student’s full name and ERAS ID#. **The student should waive the right to see the letter.** If they waive the right to see the letter, you cannot send them a copy to review.

1. What to do if you can’t write a strong letter of recommendation

This can happen for a few different reasons. Do you not know the student very well? Did you only work with them briefly? Do you feel the student is not very strong? Are you a mentor/advisor but have no research/clinical/project management relationship with the patient?

* The first step is to be up front with the student, and ask if they have any alternative options.
* If the student has no other options for letter writers, consider a few possibilities:
	+ Have the student come back and work with you for a few days so you can better see their clinical abilities
	+ Seek feedback from other colleagues who had more contact with the student
	+ Tell the student honestly that you can write a letter but that you do not feel it will be strong
	+ Make sure to focus on the strengths of the applicant, but also do not overstate places where the student is not strong
1. References:

**Bias in Letters of Recommendation:**

Schmader T, Whitehead J, Wysocki VH. A Linguistic Comparison of Letters of Recommendation for Male and Female Chemistry and Biochemistry Job Applicants. *Sex Roles*. 2007;57(7-8):509-514. doi:10.1007/s11199-007-9291-4

<https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding_gender_bias_in_letter_of_reference_writing.pdf>

<https://gofar.georgetown.edu/avoiding-bias-in-recommendation-letters/>

**General LOR Websites, including Sample Letters:**

[https://www.yu.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/Guidelines for Writing Letters of Recommendation.pdf](https://www.yu.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/Guidelines%20for%20Writing%20Letters%20of%20Recommendation.pdf)

<https://medicine.fiu.edu/resources/faculty-tools/clinical-and-classroom-teaching/clinic-and-hospital-teaching/writing-letters-of-recommendation/sample-strong-letter-of-recommendation-03-08-2018.pdf>

<https://www.sc.edu/study/colleges_schools/medicine_greenville/internal/documents/recommendation_letters.pdf>

<https://medicine.vtc.vt.edu/content/dam/medicine_vtc_vt_edu/faculty-affairs/writing_a_lor.pdf>

<https://meded.ucsf.edu/md-program/current-students/student-services/advising-career-development/letters-recommendation>

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