

WRITING AN EFFECTIVE LETTER OF REFERENCE, AND AVOIDING PITFALLS

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Family medicine faculty write letters of reference for medical students applying to residencies, residents applying for jobs and fellowships, and colleagues nominated for promotion or awards.

Letters of reference offer:

1. A unique and multifaceted description of the applicant missing from a CV—An important component of any application packet.
2. Outsized importance in the age of COVID where in-person interviews have been limited.

The most effective letters are evaluative, not summative (ie, do not just list accomplishments but describe how the candidates' accomplishments make them unique and qualified for the position, promotion, or award).



Obtain information from the candidate and understand the criteria for employment, awards or promotion and confirmation of where letter needs to be submitted.



Limit your letter to 1-2 pages and put on official letterhead.



Describe who you are and how you know the candidate (or that you do not know the candidate) and outline why you are qualified to write an accurate evaluation of the candidate.

Components of the Letter:

Brief summary (2-3 sentences) of accomplishments while highlighting unique characteristics and skills for this position or award (do not list everything on the CV).

Consider including comments about professionalism, work ethic, responsibility and reliability, but beware of gender, ethnic, and racial disparities.

Evaluation of the candidate based on the criteria obtained from the request letter (may include areas where you are not qualified to provide evaluation, explain why).

As part of evaluation, contextualize the candidate's work in terms of impact and future potential. Use specific examples whenever possible.

Summative statement of recommendation.

Offer to provide further information or clarifications on request and include a specific way to be contacted.

Bias in letter writing:

Abundant literature shows differences in letters written about women and underrepresented candidates as compared to White men. Candidates from groups underrepresented in medicine are less likely to be described using terms that confer agency, such as descriptions of leadership or achievement. Also, letters about male candidates are significantly longer than those about female candidates.

To avoid gender and racial bias in your letter:

- Avoid describing candidates based on effort, personality and interpersonal traits. Instead, descriptions should be based on knowledge, skills and ability. Provide specific examples.
- Use superlatives consistently among all candidates.
- Be consistent when referring to the candidate, using professional titles (vs first names).
- Use this bias calculator to determine whether your letter is biased based on gender, tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/

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References:

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