GUIDELINES FOR WRITING COMPELLING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Letters of recommendation for students applying to professional schools in the healthcare fields have a significant impact on whether they will be admitted. At some schools, the letters can contribute as much as 25% to 50% to the decision of whether to interview or accept a particular student.

We appreciate the fact that you are very busy and that writing letters is an additional demand on your valuable time. If circumstances prevent you from writing a detailed evaluation within the time frame requested by the student, it would best to inform the student that you cannot write a letter at this time.

As you compose your letter, please adhere to the following logistical guidelines:
- Your letter must be printed on letterhead and must include your signature.
- We advise all applicants to apply to multiple schools. Accordingly, please use a general greeting such as “Dear Admissions Committee:” rather than addressing one particular school.

Tips for writing an effective letter for an applicant to healthcare-related professional schools:
- The most effective letters are those that illustrate the applicants’s relevant attributes and experiences by sharing first-hand anecdotes. Focus on behaviors that you have observed directly when describing applicants’ suitability for professional school. There is no need to summarize other aspects of the candidate’s preparation for professional school, as his or her application will provide explanations of those activities in detail.
- Please refer to the categories listed on the back of this page for suggested topics to discuss. Consider describing:
  - The situation or context in which you have interacted with the candidate
  - The actual behavior(s) you observed
  - The result or outcome of that behavior
- Focus on the applicant’s personal traits and actions, rather than details about the lab, course, assignment, job or institution.
- Provide context for your comments. Indicate how long you have known the applicant and identify the context in which you interacted (e.g., as his or her professor, research supervisor, work supervisor, etc.)
- Only include information on grades or standardized test scores if you are providing context to help interpret them. The admissions committees will have full access to the applicant’s transcript and standardized test scores in the application.
- The most useful letters provide an accurate assessment of the applicant’s suitability for professional school and his/her desired profession, rather than generally advocating for the applicant.
- Aim for a length of three paragraphs (minimum) to 2 pages (maximum, but note that it is rare for letters to fill two full pages).
- Admissions committees find comparison information helpful. Thus, it is useful to identify the comparison group (e.g., students in a class you taught, students in your department, co-workers, etc.) and your rationale for the final comparison.

Thank you for your assistance!
Please consider the following topics for areas of focus in your letter, sharing supporting examples/anecdotes where possible
(adapted from the Association of American Medical Colleges’ list of core competencies for entering medical students)

Keep in mind that professional 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.

Understanding of and suitability for the profession:
• If you have interacted with this applicant in a clinical setting, please describe what you have observed of the candidate’s understanding of the realities of the profession, approach to interacting with patients and staff, and intellectual curiosity.

Competencies in Thinking, Reasoning, and Relevant Knowledge:
• Critical Thinking: Using logic and reasoning to identify the strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions, conclusions, or approaches to problems.
• Scientific Inquiry: Applying knowledge of the scientific process to integrate and synthesize information, solve problems, and formulate research questions and hypotheses; ability to use the language of the sciences to participate in the discourse of science and explain how scientific knowledge is discovered and validated.
• Quantitative Reasoning: Applying quantitative reasoning to describe or explain phenomena in the natural world.
• Human Behavior: Applying 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.

Interpersonal Competencies
• Service Orientation: Demonstrating a desire to help others and sensitivity to others’ needs and feelings. Demonstrating a desire to alleviate others’ distress. Recognizing and acting on personal responsibilities to society: locally, nationally, and globally.
• Social Skills: Demonstrating awareness of others’ needs, goals, feelings, as well as the ways social and behavioral cues affect peoples’ interactions and behaviors. Adjusting behaviors appropriately in response to these cues. Treating others with respect.
• Cultural Sensitivity: Demonstrating knowledge of social and cultural factors that affect interactions and behaviors. Showing an appreciation and respect for multiple dimensions of diversity. Recognizing and acting on the obligation to inform one’s own judgment. Engaging diverse and competing perspectives as a resource for learning, citizenship, and work. Recognizing and appropriately addresses bias in oneself and others. Interacting effectively with people from diverse backgrounds.
• Effective Teamwork and Leadership: Working collaboratively with others to achieve shared goals. Sharing information and knowledge with others. Putting team goals ahead of individual goals. Demonstrating insight into how to organize, motivate, and empower others to do their best work.
• Oral Communication: Effectively conveying information to others using spoken words and sentences. Listening effectively. Recognizing potential communication barriers and adjusting approach and/or providing clarifying information, accordingly.

Intrapersonal Competencies
• Ethical Responsibility to Self and Others: Behaving in an honest and ethical manner. Cultivating personal and academic integrity. Adhering to ethical principles and following rules and procedures. Resisting peer pressure to engage in unethical behavior. Encouraging others to behave in honest and ethical ways. Developing and demonstrating ethical and moral reasoning.
• Reliability and Dependability: Consistently fulfilling obligations in a timely and satisfactory manner. Taking responsibility for personal actions and performance.
• Resilience and Adaptability: Demonstrating tolerance of stressful or changing environments or situations and adapting effectively to them. Being persistent, even under difficult situations. Recovering from setbacks.
• Capacity for Improvement: Setting goals for continuous improvement and for learning new concepts and skills. Engaging in reflective practice for improvement. Soliciting and responding appropriately to feedback.

Factors that would allow the applicant to make unique contributions to the profession
• 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 professional school’s diversity, broadly defined (e.g., background, attributes, experiences, etc.)

Note: Prior to sharing information that could be considered sensitive, confirm with the applicant that s/he is comfortable with the inclusion of that information.