

Tips for Writing Strong Letters of Recommendation

Important: If you cannot write a supportive letter of recommendation (e.g., if you did not work with the student very long or did not have a good experience), please let the student know that he/she should request a letter from someone else.

The tips below assume that you are in support of the student’s application and would like to see him/her be successful:

- The strongest letters include at least 3 paragraphs:
 - Introduction – including how long and in what capacity you have known the student
 - 2nd Paragraph – outlining details of your assessment of the student’s abilities
 - Conclusion – summarizing the strength of your recommendation
- Letter length is often interpreted as a measure of the strength of your recommendation – if your recommendation is strong, the letter should go on to a second page; letters that are 1 page or less are often considered “red flags” by some program directors
- Include accurate descriptions and specific examples of the student’s abilities – avoid either exaggeration or overly vague/generic descriptors
- When possible, include statistics (e.g., “Ms. Jones is among the top 5% of students with whom I have worked,” or 10%, 20%, etc.)
- In describing any weaknesses, consider whether you can frame them positively (e.g., “demonstrated improvement in documentation...” rather than “demonstrated poor documentation”)
- Include any position titles, including faculty appointments, in your signature
- “Real” signatures are preferred over digital signatures

The table below provides a useful example of revising a “vague” or “ambiguous” letter:

TABLE 3. Suggestions for “Honest Language” Revisions of an Ambiguous Description of a Student

Letter-Writer’s Original Narrative	Reader’s Inference	Honest Language for Excellent Applicant
<p>“Sarah was on our service for 4 weeks—her first clerkship experience. She was a relatively strong student overall. She is a nice person, liked by colleagues, and she got the work done.”</p>	<p>Sarah may or may not be a high-performing student. She seems to have been effortful on her first rotation, but may have had some difficulty. How she compares with other students is unclear. The team seemed to like her, which is promising.</p>	<p>“Ms. Smith was in the top 10% of students I have worked with over the past 5 years. She has an excellent fund of knowledge compared with her peers. During her 4-week rotation with us, she showed herself to be effective in her role, industrious, and timely—not easy, given that this was her first clerkship! Ms. Smith exhibited real professionalism and had an impeccable work ethic that will continue to serve her patients, her team, and her career well.”</p> <p>Honest Language for Problematic Applicant</p> <p>“Ms. Smith is a hardworking student with an above-average fund of knowledge but weaker problem-solving skills than expected for her level of training. She shows genuine professionalism. She will find greater success in an environment that provides mentorship for any problems she encounters.”</p>

SAMPLE LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION – STRONG

Esteemed Residency Program
Well-Known University
1234 University Way
Big City, Florida 54321

March 19, 2014

Dear Program Director,

It is my pleasure to write in support of the application of Mr. Ian Harris for your residency program. I have been an educator for decades with considerable experience with national organizations. I worked closely with Mr. Harris during his third year clerkship as well as during his acting internship. As is evident from his CV, Mr. Harris has excelled throughout his career with many notable accomplishments which I will not repeat here. I will focus on my experiences with Mr. Harris, primarily those related to his clinical abilities and which demonstrate the qualities necessary for your residency: excellent knowledge, clinical skills, patient care, and leadership. I have observed Mr. Harris in both the inpatient and outpatient setting, taught him in class, and overseen his performance during his clerkship and acting internship.

In addition to considerable intellect and exemplary performances on standardized examinations, Mr. Harris is a warm, engaging individual who teaches others by example, is inclusive, and consistently exhibits curiosity and motivation to learn. He comes prepared for all types of learning situations, having researched the relevant topics so that he can provide quality care as well as participate actively in class and clinical supervision. Mr. Harris is articulate, well-read, and able to utilize his knowledge effectively in the clinical setting. In addition to prioritizing his own learning, Mr. Harris considers the needs of others. On multiple occasions, he has arrived in clinic with handouts on relevant clinical topics tailored for the rest of the medical team. He has been described as one of the best students to rotate on our service by our residents and several attending physicians. A colleague was so impressed by Mr. Harris' knowledge and skills that she invited him to give a presentation during Grand Rounds. His presentation was outstanding – comprehensive in scope yet presented efficiently and effectively. On his own time, Mr. Harris designed a well-conceived, thorough study protocol on risk factors for readmission within 30 days to our inpatient service.

In conclusion, I am happy to give Mr. Harris my highest recommendation for your residency program. In my experience, he is in the top 10% of all medical students with whom I have worked over the past 20 years. If you have any additional questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Joseph Attending, M.D.
Associate Professor of Medicine

Note: This letter is strong for several reasons. It describes how and in what context the letter writer knows the student. It provides specific examples of the student's performance, including aspects that made him stand out in comparison to his peers. It also provides an estimate of how this student ranks among all students with whom the letter writer has interacted over the years.

SAMPLE LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION – WEAK

Esteemed Residency Program
Well-Known University
1234 University Way
Big City, Florida 54321

March 19, 2014

Dear Program Director,

I am pleased to write this letter of recommendation for John Jones, who was first introduced to me when he came to Butterworth Hospital as a fourth year student in 2013.

I found Mr. Jones to be a very hard working, conscientious individual. He took very good care of patients who were assigned to him, and he made sure that all the work-up was done before the morning rounds, where he actively participated. His responsibilities included taking histories and physicals, writing SOAP notes, collecting lab reports from the previous day, writing transfer and discharge summaries and also participating in morning reports and noon conferences. He also gave some excellent presentations. He has excellent clinical skills and displays them with mature mannerisms.

John is a very humble individual who gets along well with his peers and the entire medical team. It is therefore without reservations that I recommend him to you for any residency program that he may be seeking. I am sure he will be a valuable asset to your organization.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you need further information.

Sincerely yours,

William Attending, M.D.
Associate Professor of Medicine

Note: This letter is weak for several reasons. It is vague and non-specific, describing what any medical student would do on a rotation. There are no specific examples of John's work provided. It appears the writer does not even know the student's specialty choice. Overall, the letter is of little value in assessing the student's application.