



How To Write a Compelling Letter of Recommendation

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Physicians are frequently asked to write letters of recommendation for students, trainees, and even colleagues, but they are rarely taught how to write a compelling letter. When asked for a letter of recommendation, honesty and authenticity are paramount. If you do not know the candidate well enough or if you know the person well, but have some reservations about writing a favorable letter, be honest and politely decline or let them decide if they still want you to write a letter despite your expressed hesitation about being able to offer strong support.

If you decide to write a strong, supportive letter, gather relevant information about the candidate by asking for a current curriculum vitae, and ask why they are interested in the position. Consider meeting with the candidate to discuss their career goals, clarify their interest, and assess their suitability for the position.

When writing the letter, maintain a professional tone and use your institution’s letterhead. Remember to proofread and edit your letter before sending it. Consider using the following format for drafting the letter.

Salutation	Use a personalized salutation instead of something generic like “To whom it may concern.”
Introductory paragraph	Begin by unequivocally stating how strongly you recommend the candidate. Introduce yourself by describing your current position and qualifications. Explain how you know the candidate and for how long , and why you are qualified to write a letter of recommendation.
Body of the letter	Present the candidate truthfully, but positively. You should offer strong and convincing support. Give specific examples of the candidate’s professional attributes and accomplishments. Focus on the candidate’s attributes relevant to the position- teamwork, motivation, communication skills, emotional intelligence, leadership, management skills, etc. Address the candidate as Dr. X throughout or start and end with Dr. X and use the first name in the middle of the letter. Pay attention to gender bias. The career stage of the candidate may influence this. Address the requirements of the position and how the candidate is well suited for the position. Try to quantify the candidate’s abilities with respect to their peers. Avoid writing a generic, resume-repeating letter that lacks substance. Avoid irrelevant personal information such as ethnicity, age, religion, marital status, medical issues, political affiliations, etc. Pay attention to gender and racial bias. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letters written for women and minorities tend to be shorter when compared to letters for men or white candidates. • Women and minorities are more frequently described as communal or compassionate (unselfish, warm, helpful, kind, sensitive, caring, nurturing, etc.) or with grindstone adjectives (tireless, committed, hardworking, etc.) that evoke effort, not concrete skills. • Letters for women are also more likely to mention aspects of their personal life. • Letters for men focus more on their accomplishments and contain more agentic (confident, ambitious, self-confident) and standout adjectives (excellent, superb, outstanding, etc.) • Bias isn’t just a male letter writer problem; women letter writers are just as susceptible. • Consider using a gender bias calculator- Link
Summary paragraph	Summarize your enthusiasm and strong support in recommending the candidate. Invite further inquiry for additional information or questions.
Signature	Include your professional title and your contact information (email address and phone number).

References

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