



Health Professions Advising  
Princeton University

## Writing Letters of Recommendation

### INFORMATION FOR RECOMMENDERS

The Health Professions Advising Office is aware of the substantial time commitment involved in writing letters of recommendation, and we would like to thank you for your efforts. As one of a group of letters written on behalf of Princeton applicants to medical school, yours is essential to the admissions process. A persuasive recommendation letter can have a significant impact on an applicant's candidacy during this competitive process. After reading this material, if you have questions about writing letters or the medical school application process, do not hesitate to contact us at (609) 258-3144, [hpa@princeton.edu](mailto:hpa@princeton.edu).

### THE BASICS

- Think carefully about how well you know the student or alumnus who is requesting a letter. Do you know him/her well enough to write an endorsement for medical school? If for any reason you do not feel that you can write positively on an applicant's behalf, be honest with him/her and decline to write the letter.
- We advise med school applicants to provide their recommenders with information about their academic studies, employment history, extracurricular activities, volunteer work, and research (often in the form of a resume) as well as a copy of a past assignment they may have done for you. It may also be helpful for you to see a draft of the autobiography that we request all applicants to write prior to setting up an interview with us in the spring of the year they are applying. Ask for this material if it is not offered and you think it may help you.
- Sit down with the applicant and discuss his/her interest in the field of medicine and reasons for pursuing a medical education.
- **Confidentiality.** While it is the student or alumnus's right to decide if the letter will remain confidential or non-confidential, we encourage applicants to keep their letters confidential, as only confidential letters are taken seriously by admissions committees. Applicants are asked to sign a waiver as part of the paperwork they complete before interviewing with our office. Unless you are otherwise notified, you may assume that the applicant has waived his/her right to see your letter, and that its contents are confidential.
- **Letters should be on official department or office letterhead, and please, don't forget to sign your letter.** Make sure to use your full name and professional title.
- An applicant may provide you with a school-specific recommendation form, including a chart or grid where you are asked to rank students. We do not recommend that you complete this form; Health Professions Advising does not complete them, as we believe detailed comments in a thoughtful letter more fully support Princeton candidates.

## WHAT TO INCLUDE

An author's personal style influences the format for his/her letters. However, many writers follow a composition similar to the following:

- Note that you would recommend this applicant specifically for medical school. Applicants should not be using letters originally written for another graduate program or award.
- Indicate how long and in what capacity you have known the applicant. Explore how this applicant compares in intellectual ability to others you have encountered this year or in previous years. The more you are able to quantify your praise—"Jane performed in the top 5% of students in my class," or "John is in the top third of the students I have ever taught"—the better.
- If possible, evaluate the student's potential for becoming the kind of doctor you might like to see in the field. How has the applicant demonstrated a commitment to medicine? Does he/she strike you as a compassionate individual who will make a good doctor some day? Does the student seem familiar with health care?
- Discuss the student's coursework, including the nature of the course(s), difficulty of coursework/major, grades received, notable work assignments, etc. Reflect on the student's academic ability, including communication skills (oral and written), listening and observational abilities, attention to detail, diligence, foreign language skills, organizational ability, originality, and resourcefulness.
- In addition, discuss the applicant's . . .
  - ⌚ *Intellectual ability*, such as capacity for critical thinking, the ability to understand, analyze, and synthesize information, problem-solving skills, curiosity, and teaching or research potential.
  - ⌚ *Interpersonal skills*, including ability to collaborate and get along with peers, response to criticism, leadership, and attitude toward supervision.
  - ⌚ *Personal qualities*, such as maturity, compassion, empathy, responsibility, creativity, self-awareness, demonstrated judgment, and initiative.
  - ⌚ *Special talents*, including any passion, extracurricular activity, or hobby that makes the candidate unique even if not immediately relevant to the practice of medicine. Mention depth of involvement and any accolades earned.
  - ⌚ *Special academic circumstances*. All Princeton students/alumni applying to medical school have a formal interview with a health professions adviser, who writes a "committee letter" that will sit on top of the individual letters of recommendation and serve as a general introduction between the Princeton senior or graduate and the admissions committees. One of the many purposes of this letter is to give context to anomalies in a candidate's academic record so that they may be better understood. Circumstances such as dips in grades, incomplete coursework, re-taking the MCAT, and disciplinary actions are all fairly common. Should you feel qualified to do so, you are urged to discuss such situations in your letter as well.
  - ⌚ You may wish to conclude your letter with a reaffirmation of your endorsement of the applicant's candidacy and offer to answer follow-up questions if necessary.

## WHAT TO AVOID

- Don't speculate. Be as specific and factual as possible. Give concrete examples to illustrate your characterizations of the applicant. Base your statements on observations and information obtained through direct contact with the applicant or their school record.

- Avoid discussing an individual's race, religion, national origin, age, disability, sexual orientation, citizenship status, or marital status. Also avoid commenting on an applicant's appearance, family background, health, or other personal circumstances unless they are immediately relevant.
- Applicants should not be asked to write their own letters of recommendation. And if another person assists you in writing the letter (such as a preceptor), the pronoun "we" should be used throughout the letter and it should be co-signed, ideally, if possible. However, a letter written only by a preceptor is acceptable to medical schools as long as the author is a candidate for an advanced degree.

**HOW TO SUBMIT YOUR LETTER** Letters are submitted to medical schools through our office, with the applicants' committee letters and other recommendations attached. Send your letter to Health Professions Advising, 305 West College, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544. Tel: (609) 258-3144. Email: [hpa@princeton.edu](mailto:hpa@princeton.edu). Fax: (609) 258-6170. Faxed or emailed letters are acceptable but only if followed by the signed original.