The Write Stuff:
How to Write, Read & Analyze Letters of Recommendation

Gwen McIntosh, MD, MPH

Rural & Community Educators

Faculty Development Conference

Objectives

- Identify the critical content needed for letters of recommendation

- Recognize the common errors made in writing letters of recommendation

- Develop tactics to improve the content and analysis of letters of recommendation

- Identify strategies to improve efficiency in writing and reading letters of recommendation

Why is the LOR important?

- Provides important evidence and information to a selection committee

- Weighted heavily by many selection committees

- Can be as important or more important than other components of the application

- Allows the reader to get a clear idea of what the applicant is "really" like

Why are narrative comments valuable?

Narrative comments:

- Provide the most meaningful information on an applicant

- Create a vivid picture of the applicant's individual strengths from someone who has observed these

- Can highlight an applicant's unique characteristics that might not be evident elsewhere in application

What is the *critical content* for a meaningful letter or evaluation?
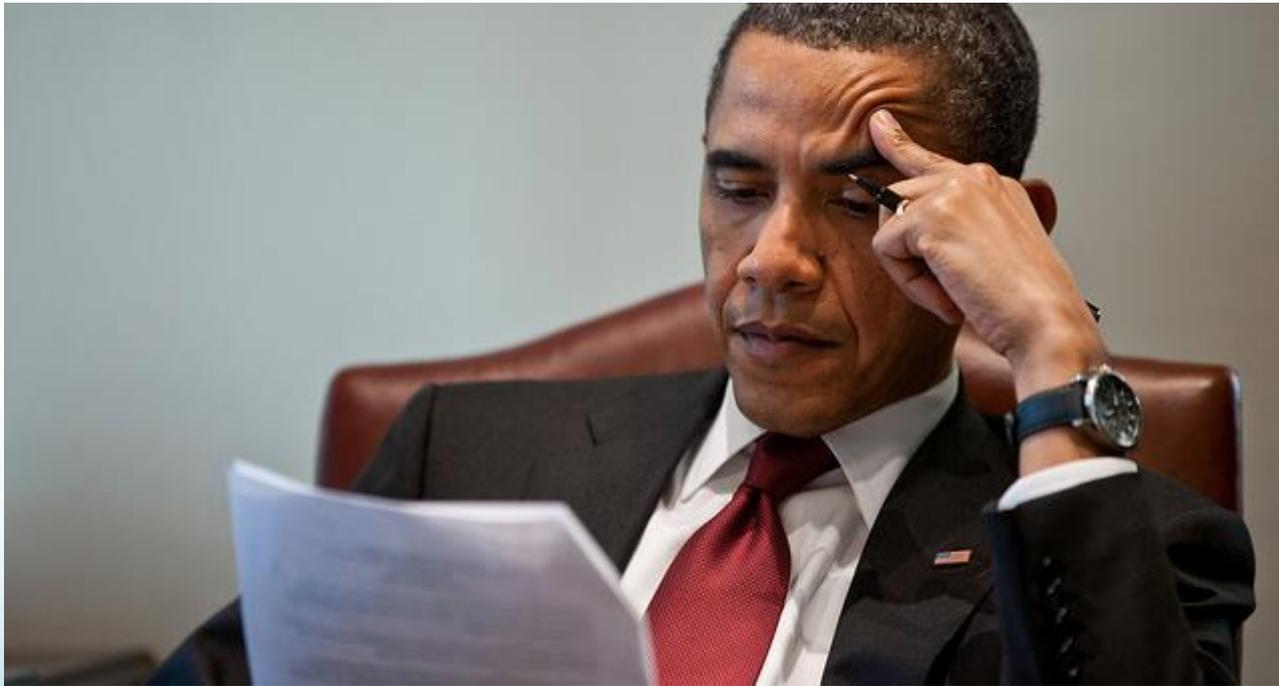
Critical Content

- *Specific* comments based on *direct observation*

- Clinical skills
  - Physical exam
  - Developing a differential diagnosis
  - Clinical reasoning, knowledge base

- Teamwork, work ethic, interpersonal skills

- Communication skills

- Ability to prioritize

Critical Content

- Comparison to peers
  - "top 10%"
  - "one of the best"….this month? this year? ever?

- Explanation of your role and time with learner
  - "I spent one month as the ward attending supervising Sally Student on her pediatric acting internship."

Common Errors in Writing Letters

What have you seen as common errors or problems with letters of recommendation?

Group Activity: Review of Letters

Common Errors

- Superlatives without comments to support

- Vague, very general comments e.g. "solid"
  - No specific, illustrative details on performance

- Lack of comments on clinic skills

- Lack of global recommendation/peer comparison

- Rehashing the applicant CV

- Typos/incorrect name/ inconsistent gender

A Brief Word on Superlatives...

- Superlatives without clinical context are not helpful

    "Pat is an *excellent* student."

- "*Excellent*" is the most common descriptor in the Dean's letter
- Excellent can mean:
    - ✓ Top 20% of class…
    - ✓ …or top 65% of class
    - ✓ At half of the schools using this term, an "excellent" student is in the bottom ½ of the class
    - ✓ No schools use this term to describe the best students

Naidich et al. Acad Radiol. 2007.

Improving the Content of Your Letters

- Make *specific* comments

- Based on direct-observation

- Don't rely on memory: record observations as you go along

- Write letters close to your time with the learner to avoid losing track of details

- Use the rating scale descriptors as a guide

Rating Scale Descriptors

	Advanced	Competent	Needs Improvement	Unacceptable: Needs Attention	Not Evaluated
Patient Care: Students are expected to provide patient care that is compassionate, appropriate, and effective for the treatment of health problems and the promotion of health.					
1. Takes an effective history	☐ Identifies and fully characterizes all patient concerns in an organized fashion. Recognizes and attends to biopsychosocial issues.	☐ Identifies and characterizes most patient concerns in an organized fashion.	☐ Sometimes misses important information. History generally not fully characterized.	☐ Often misses important information. Patient concerns poorly characterized.	☐ Not observed.
2. Performs appropriate physical exam	☐ Able to efficiently focus exam based on differential diagnosis. Attentive to detail.	☐ Demonstrates correct technique with an organized approach.	☐ Does not always demonstrate correct technique. Not consistently organized.	☐ Disorganized. Frequently not thorough. Misses and/or misinterprets findings.	☐ Not observed.
3. Generates differential diagnosis	☐ Consistently generates a complete differential diagnosis. Able to demonstrate clinical reasoning.	☐ Consistently generates a complete differential diagnosis.	☐ Cannot consistently generate a complete differential diagnosis.	☐ Poor use of data. Misses primary diagnoses repeatedly.	☐ Not observed

Improving the Content of Your Letters

- Don't focus exclusively on personal characteristics

"Pat was a pleasure to work with. She was always pleasant and cheerful."

Vs.

"Pat is always pleasant and cheerful. She interacts well with staff, children and parents. She demonstrates appropriate confidence in examining children."

Improving the Content of Your Letters

- Avoid use of past tense and passive verbs

Passive ⇒ Active

Passive	Active
was a good listener…	listens intently and without interruption…
had a good bedside manner…	demonstrates comfort in speaking to patients
was a pleasure to work with…	works diligently to assist all member of the care team…

Improving the Content of Your Letters

- Support your superlatives with at least one specific example of clinic skill

"Pat was an excellent student."

Vs.

"Pat is an excellent student. Pat performs well above the level of her peers in all aspects. She displays advanced physical exam skills and a sophisticated ability to develop a thorough differential."

Improving Your Efficiency in Writing Letters

- Give yourself a schedule (and stick to it)
  - Letters of recommendation: 2 weeks
    - Timeliness promotes better recall of specifics
    - Prompt is better than perfect

- Use templates for letters
  - Request for information from the learner
  - Letter
    - Identify the content you want to include

Templates: Information from Your Learner

Dear Sally Student,

I am happy to write a letter of recommendation on your behalf. To assist in writing the most useful and informative letter possible for you, please provide me with the following:

❑ An up to date copy of your CV

❑ An up to date copy of your transcript

❑ A draft of your personal statement

❑ A signed copy of the ERAS letter of recommendation waiver form

Once I receive all of these materials, I will begin to write your letter. Do not worry if your personal statement is a very rough draft, I simply find the draft of the statement useful as a tool personalize your letter of recommendation.

Templates: example of LOR for Residency Application

Dear Program Director,

It is my pleasure to write this letter of recommendation for *Student X* of the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health class of 2012. *X has/has* not waived *her/his* right to see this letter.

Descriptor of contact with learner: clinical setting and time. E.g. I worked directly with Student X supervising him in specialty clinic for one month during his 4th year elective.

Specific comments on strong clinical skills

Specific comments on strong teamwork/ interpersonal skills

Specific comments on other unique attributes such as leadership, compassion, research, organizational skills, global health experiences.

Summary recommendation/peer comparison: E.g. Student X ranks among the top 15% of students I have worked with this year. Based on my observation of *his/her* clinical performance I believe *X* will be (*outstanding, very strong or other appropriate descriptor*) as a house officer and pediatrician.

Improving Your Efficiency

- Say no when appropriate
  - Insufficient contact with learner
  - Poor learner performance
  - Use diplomacy
  - Be candid about the strength of the letter you would write

Improving Your Efficiency

- Know your limits
  - Most LORs should be *no more than one page* long
  - The better you know the learner, the harder it is to be concise- edit yourself!
  - Don't cover content that is evident other places in the learner application

Summary:
Writing, Reading & Analyzing Letters of Recommendation

- Identify and include your critical content

- Recognize and avoid the common errors in writing

- Use strategies to improve your content

- Use tools and templates to improve your efficiency

- Use your knowledge of critical content to identify gaps and problems in the letters you read

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I am happy to write a letter of recommendation on your behalf. To assist me in writing you the most useful letter and informative letter possible, please provide the following:

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- ❑ A draft of your personal statement
- ❑ A signed copy of the ERAS letter of recommendation waiver form

Once I receive these materials, I will begin to write your letter. Do not worry if your personal statement is a very rough draft, I simply find the draft of the statement useful as a tool personalize your letter of recommendation.

If you would like to meet to further discuss letters of recommendation or to discuss any other questions about the residency application process, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Thomas Teacher, M.D.

Sample Template for Letter of Recommendation

<div align="right">Date</div>

Re: *Student X*
AAMC ID #*: XXXXXXX*

Dear Program Director,

It is my pleasure to write this letter of recommendation for *Student X* of the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health class of 2018. *X has/has* not waived *her/his* right to see this letter.

Descriptor of contact with learner: clinical setting and time. E.g. I worked directly with Student X supervising him/her in specialty clinic for one month during his/her 4th year elective.

Specific comments on strong clinical skills

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Summary recommendation/peer comparison: E.g. Student X ranks among the top *X*% of students I have worked with this year. Based on my observation of *his/her* clinical performance I believe *X* will be (*outstanding, very strong or other appropriate descriptor*) as a house officer and pediatrician.

Sincerely,

Your name, degree
Academic title (if applicable)
Department
Institution