

Guidelines for Writing Academic Recommendations for Medical School

Currently medical school applicants are asked to submit at least two letters of recommendation in two different sciences from faculty who have taught the student. In addition, we suggest a non-science letter and one or two letters from experiences where the student has had the chance to be more directly involved with the recommender.

We suggest that **students set up an appointment** with you and bring a transcript, a resume of their activities, jobs, special awards, etc., and a short statement conveying how they became interested in medicine and what has reinforced this interest. After reviewing these materials, we suggest you interview the student so as to gain some personal insight of that student. This helps offset the recommender submitting a generic letter. Because science classes tend to be large, it is difficult for faculty to get to know all the students. The above represents a practical solution for meeting the recommendation requirement.

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Many **admissions committees depend heavily on recommendations** to gain insight on personal strengths and weaknesses of applicants, information that cannot be gleaned from the student's transcript and biographical data. If you don't feel you know a student well enough to write a recommendation, tell them so. This is a better decision for you and the student than the submission of an uninformative or equivocal recommendation.

As a recommender, you're in a position to help an applicant assess their chances for admission, realistically and critically. Should you feel prepared to write a positive recommendation, but one in which it would be appropriate to cite some qualifiers or weaknesses, discuss this first with the applicant. Explain that, taken in the context of an entire letter, such comments form a more honest, credible, and even more interesting picture of the student.

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Be aware that **admissions committees differ**. Some, particularly those on the East coast, are not familiar with the Stanford undergraduate curriculum. To say that a Stanford student is average,

without mentioning that the vast majority of Stanford students are accepted by professional schools, can be the *kiss of death* for an applicant. This point is not meant to discourage negative comments, but to alert you to the fact that you may quite unintentionally write what could be interpreted as a negative letter of recommendation.

Many faculty members prefer to **write letters in conjunction with their TA's**, who may know the students being recommended on a more personal level. Most graduate and professional schools find this type of "joint" recommendation acceptable and helpful. The faculty member will often discuss the nature of the course and the student's performance compared to other students who have taken the course, while the TA will discuss any personal or intellectual qualities observed in the student, such as creativity, insight, or dedication. The recommendation will then be co-signed by the TA and the professor, or the professor may simply incorporate some of the TA's comments into the letter. In some cases, the professor might indicate that the TA is experienced and their assessment of students is reliable and accurate.

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A good letter of recommendation will discuss how long and in what capacity you've known the applicant, his/her strengths and weaknesses, any unusual aspects of the applicant's background that might contribute to or affect academic work, and knowledge of any extracurricular activities the applicant has pursued during college years.

Discuss the student's academic background in greater detail than a listing of course numbers. If you know that the student has taken the most rigorous academic series, or chosen to complete a very demanding individual project, or has "padded" his/her course schedule with buffer courses, relate these matters to an admissions committee. It's crucial information that they will want to know. A student's grade point average will become more meaningful if admissions committees are aware of the nature of courses completed.

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Compare the student to other students you know, especially if he/she was in your class. Indicate how many students enroll in the course, how long it has been taught, etc. Medical schools are particularly interested in the applicant's intellectual abilities, motivations for medicine, stamina, dedication, dependency, and ability to relate well and communicate with people of all backgrounds.

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If you don't have the secretarial services or time to write a recommendation, please don't consent to write one. An application will be delayed and sometimes discounted if the file is not complete because of a missing recommendation. If you have questions about a recommendation you are prepare, you are welcome to contact an advisor at the Undergraduate Advising and Research at 723-2426. Questions regarding procedures for filing recommendations at the Career Development Center (CDC) should be directed to CDC's Reference File Service at 723-1548.