



WAYNE STATE
School of Medicine

Suggestions for Writing a MEDICAL STUDENT Letter of Recommendation FOR RESIDENCY PROGRAMS

OFFICE OF CURRICULAR AFFAIRS
OFFICE OF STUDENT AFFAIRS
WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF
MEDICINE

ABSTRACT

A quick guide for first time or long-time writers of student letters of recommendation for residencies.

Christopher Steffes
CSteffes@med.wayne.edu

WSUSOM appreciates the effort that all faculty make in providing **Letters of Recommendation (LORs)** for our students. This brief guide outlines the current process of residency applications with LORs and some tips on writing. This may be helpful especially for newer faculty who are new to writing the letters. Since most of us have waived access to our own letters over the years, we have possibly never seen an example of a strong or unfavorable letter of recommendation.

Experienced faculty, especially those who have written and read thousands of letters, may look this over and agree or disagree with some of the advice. We are open to feedback for future versions of this handout.

The Application

Residency programs require 3-4 letters of recommendation for ERAS applications and only 4 are allowed to be sent to any one program. The SOM sends an extensive Medical Student Performance Evaluation (MSPE) for each student. This includes a narrative and ranking of the student's progress and performance, professionalism evaluation and comments from all M3 rotations as well as M4 rotations in the first 4 months of segment 4 (April through July) prior to the ERAS deadline in late September. The comments are anonymous, but all are included. The pre-populated letter template is jointly reviewed and edited with the student during a minimum one-hour meeting with an associate dean or designated letter writer in the SOM administration.

LORs, on the other hand, are usually not seen by students as most will rightfully waive their right to review in the ERAS portal. The uploaded letters are also not visible to anyone in administration but only to program directors that the students direct them to.

As most students are applying to clinical residencies, it is best that the LORs are authored by clinicians who know the student's clinical performance as M3 or M4 students. A letter from a research advisor may be a supportive 4th letter but program directors are typically focused on substantive clinical evaluation of the resident applicant.

Structured Letters, made popular by the Emergency Medicine programs, are gaining favor, along with departmental letters, chair letters, and other forms of evaluation. We expect that this will be more the standard in the future. Traditionally, the mostly non-clinical chair letters, are considered as non-core/supplemental 4th letters. This is currently still the case for many specialties.

Certainly, with the change of step 1 scoring to pass/fail, all these letters are increasingly important in the student's application. A LOR can make an application or can absolutely sink one. The goal of this guide is to briefly capture some tips and hints to accurately and adequately communicate the student's potential and performance to a residency program director in a standard letter.

Your letter of recommendation is a critical part of a student's Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) application. Agreeing to write a strong and thoughtful letter will tremendously help the student's application. If you feel that you cannot write a strong LOR, please tell the student right away. It is okay to say, "I can write you a letter, but it won't be my strongest letter. I encourage you to approach another letter writer." If you agree to write a LOR, the student will send a Letter Request Form to you directly from ERAS. If you are writing both a Standard Letter of Evaluation (SLOE) and a Letter of Recommendation for the same student, both documents should be uploaded as a single PDF file. Otherwise, the SLOE should be uploaded alone.

All letter writers are required to upload their letters directly to ERAS through the [Letter of Recommendation Portal](#). There is no longer an option to submit the LOR to the school. Ensuring high quality (proper spelling of the student's name, correct pronouns, etc.) of the letter is especially important. We respectfully request that you submit your letter of recommendation **BEFORE September 15**. Your timely submission is extremely important for the student's ability to submit a complete application for residency. Although any letter submitted prior to the ERAS deadline will be part of the initial download, (typically the last Wednesday of September 9/27 for 2023), students suffer from persistent tachycardia until all letters are uploaded. Students receive notification when their requested LORs are uploaded to ERAS. Timely population of your letters in the portal supporting their application is a great encouragement to our students and will significantly reduce their anxiety during this stressful process. Please know that we do encourage students to send you gentle reminders until they receive notification of receipt and upload from ERAS.

Initial Considerations

Most letters of recommendation (LOR) will be medical students applying for residency in the various Matches (NRMP, SF Match/Ophtho, Military, CaRMS, AUA). Although these considerations apply to others such as residents applying for fellowship, residents applying for their first job post-training, or undergrads/grad students applying for med school, we will here concentrate on letters for medical students.

WSUSOM med students likely to request LOR for:

ERAS (Electronic Residency Application Service): AAMC service that processes applications to allopathic residencies.

VSLO (Visiting Student Learning Opportunity): AAMC service that coordinates "away" fourth year clerkships. (Enrollment management will provide students with "good standing" certification). Often these programs are using M4 electives as auditions for residency and the M4 spots are competitive. This initial LOR is a part of their selection process.

It Is Assumed You Know the Student

If not, and you feel you cannot write a knowledgeable letter, politely decline. If you cannot write a supportive letter of recommendation (e.g., if you did not work with the student for a sufficient amount of time or did not have a good experience), please let the student know that he/she should request a letter from someone else.

Exceptions: Chair of Department, Clerkship Director. These leaders will be asked for LOR relevant to the specialty of interest to the student.

Timeline—Student should give you at least 2 weeks to write a LOR in order to meet the timeline. Allow yourself at least 1 hour to write and upload a LOR.

ERAS Deadline is typically the last Wednesday of September, this year September 27th. All letters need to be uploaded by that date into ERAS.

Our students are cautioned that letters from September rotations are high risk, in that in addition to the holiday at the beginning of the month, there is no way to complete the month and then ask for a letter. Students needing a final letter for their specialty in September are advised to meet with faculty at the beginning of the month to go over a plan for evaluation of skills prior to writing a “rush” letter by the deadline at the end of the month, knowing that this is not always possible or desirable.

While ERAS certification proceeds independent of the letter upload process, an application with even one missing letter is not considered complete and puts the student at very high risk for interview consideration on season opening. Letters can be added late after the deadline, but at that point assigning them to programs is problematic, and it is doubtful that they will be seen by the program directors.

Meet With the Student

Confirm residency interest and eventual goals.

This may not be the time or place to “advise” regarding specialty choice—presumably the student would have sought counsel earlier—but it can be an opportunity to discuss the student’s competitiveness and potential for success. All career advising is welcome and sometimes this letter meeting is the first good advising that the student has sought. If you genuinely feel students would not do well in the specialty, you probably should decline to write LOR rather than state this in the letter unbeknownst to the student. Also, feel free to share your concerns with the SOM Office of Student Affairs, so that we can provide further council.

In the competitive Match environment, please note that a student may be applying to more than one specialty. Your openness in supporting their application with a dedicated letter adapted to more than one specialty, if appropriate, can be very reassuring to the student.

Ask for a copy of CV and personal statement – we expect our students to have these available for your review when requesting LORs, at least in draft form at the outset of the season.

Confirm AMCAS number (or another identifier). This will appear at the top of the letter and is likely included in the information sheet from ERAS the student should give you; this information sheet has helpful directions for formatting the LOR as well as where to deliver the letter once written. Verifying and including the correct identifier is especially important for students who have recently undergone a name change due to marriage or otherwise.

Determine FERPA status....

FERPA

FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) Federal law regulating use and transmission of student assessments and grades, including LOR. The student decides whether to waive their right/privilege to see your letter.

- The perception is that waiving the right ensures that LOR reflects the writer’s opinion without also trying to please the student, but...
- Some letter writers wish to share the letter with the student for transparency (i.e., so there are no “surprise” questions during interview), or even as an encouragement for

their own files. If you choose to share your uploaded letter with the student, a PDF version is recommended.

- Determine with the students whether they have waived the right.
- It is the strong recommendation of WSUSOM that the student waive their right, and most letter writers insist that students do so to maximize the authenticity of the letter's content.

Gather Information

Review and Confirm specifics in the student's CV such as:

Advanced degree - such as MPH or PhD

Research - such as roles in research, publications, grants

Other scholarly activity - including presentations, papers, other writing, courses/sessions taught, conferences.

Leadership roles - such as student senate, student organization officers, representative to national organization, etc.

Volunteer/extra-curricular activities - such as student led free clinics, interest groups, civic groups. Most of our students are very active in volunteer medical activities.

Tips for Writing the Letter of Recommendation

Make the letter personal and be clear that you really do know the student.

Include a positive story about them from the ward or clinic, or how impressed/pleased you were with a presentation to the team or how the student overcame problems in finishing a project.

Emphasize anything that establishes that, to you, this student really stood out from others.

If applying for residency or other clinical position, focus comments on clinical abilities.

If applying for research position, focus on research abilities.

Include comments you'd like to read in a LOR:

"Able to integrate basic sciences into clinical realm."

"Personable, interacted equally well with medical team, nursing/support staff, and patient and family."

"Always timely, completed tasks, knowledgeable about patient and disease process"
etc...."

"Loved by office staff/nurses/APPs/OR staff."

The effective use of powerful terms:

“Smart,” “hard-working,” “integrative,” “pleasant,” “fun,”
OK to use neutral terms about personality such as “quiet,” “self-effacing,” as long as those characteristics didn’t adversely affect performance.

Avoid certain comments:

“Best student I’ve ever had!” (Even if true, makes the reader wonder about your level of experience.)

Writing the LOR

Suggestions for organizing the letter:

- This is NOT a template. Each LOR should read as a new, independently written document and hopefully not as a fill-in-the-blank.

The strongest letters include at least 3 paragraphs:

1. Introduction – including how long and in what capacity you have known the student.
2. Supporting Paragraph – outlining details of your assessment of the student’s abilities.
3. 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 may be 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 with,” 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”) and note the student’s positive response to feedback and self-improvement. We all want teachable residents!

Include any position titles, including your WSUSOM faculty appointment, in your signature.

“Real” signatures are preferred over digital signatures, although in our changing world.

Specific Suggestions (Again Not a Template, Unless You Want It to Be)

Top of letter include name, AMCAS number, and salutation (“Dear Program Director”)

Opening paragraph

Context: applying for residency; you supervised/mentored/observed; extent of interaction with student; knowledge of applicant

Next paragraph (or two)

Discuss clinical abilities (or research abilities)

Strength of student in performing these activities

Give examples, use personal identifying story, relate to the anticipated residency or specialty, etc.

If there is an advanced degree or scholarly activity, how this might enhance clinical abilities.

Next paragraph

Discuss strengths/abilities in another realm.

Research, presentations, leadership, volunteer, etc.

How these abilities integrated with your observations on the ward or clinic

Relate a personal story if relevant.

Next paragraph (only if relevant)

Include hesitations or cautions, trying to put into good light (this confirms you really do know the applicant and are not blinded by their good traits)

“Her increased participation and contributions on rounds were encouraged on rounds as she always had something valuable to add.”

Concluding paragraph

Summary. Again, endorse the application.

It is hard to know whether to use terms such as “recommend highly” or “recommend without reservation” since these may mean different things at different sites. They do not hurt though.

May again include personal comments about abilities.

May include statements (especially if you are a program director) that we want to train this student or we are working to recruit this student.

Final sentence (include in paragraph or stand-alone). “Mr. Doe waived his right under FERPA to see this letter.”

Final Considerations

Read and re-read your letter. Make sure the name is correct, especially since you are probably writing multiple letters. Very embarrassing to all if name or pronouns are incorrect. *Please also verify which specialty you are endorsing for this applicant!*

It should be on letterhead paper, not just plain. You can use WSUSOM letterhead or specific office/clinic/hospital letterhead. Here is a link to download the WSUSOM letterhead: [som-letterhead.docx \(live.com\)](http://som-letterhead.docx(live.com))

Be sure your telephone number or e-mail address is included so programs can contact you if needed.

Use spell-check. This reflects both on you (not interested or competent enough to be correct) and on the student ("he really chose a loser to write this letter").

Original signature.

Make sure to store it as a PDF for ERAS or in your personal files for upload in a future ERAS cycle for senior students who may be going out on a research year or leave of absence.

SAMPLE LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION – STRONG

Dear Program Director:

It is my pleasure to write in support of the application of Mr. Homer Price for your residency program. I have been an educator for decades with considerable experience with national organizations. I worked closely with Mr. Price during his third-year clerkship as well as during his subinternship in Internal Medicine. As is evident from his CV, Mr. Harris has excelled throughout his career with many notable accomplishments. 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. Price in both the inpatient and outpatient setting, taught him in class, and overseen his performance during his clerkship and subinternship.

In addition to considerable intellect and exemplary performances on standardized examinations, Mr. Price 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. Price is articulate, well-read, and able to utilize his knowledge effectively in the clinical setting. In addition to prioritizing his own learning, Mr. Price 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. Price's 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. Price 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. Price 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. We would be pleased to recruit him to our program. If you have any additional questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Joseph Bonaparte, M.D.

Associate Professor of Medicine

Assistant Program Director

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. It could be improved by including more specialty specific comments and qualities, if appropriate to the students plans. However, often students will need more generic letters as they may be applying to multiple specialties or change their minds (or have them changed for them if they do not match in their first-choice specialty).

SAMPLE LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION – WEAK

Dear Program Director:

I am pleased to write this letter of recommendation for Ronald Weasley, who was first introduced to me when he came to Wellcare Hospital as a fourth-year student in 2022.

I found Mr. Weasley 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 participating in morning reports and noon conferences. He also gave some excellent presentations. He has excellent clinical skills and displays them with mature mannerisms.

Ronald 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,

Harrison Ford, 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 Ronald'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.

Cheat card for letter writers

DO:

Example:

Use Letterhead som-letterhead.docx (live.com)	Hospital or University
Include the student's name, AAMC ID number, and note whether the student has waived their rights to see the letter.	Student A AAMC ID Number: 45648748 NOTE: Student A has waived her rights to see this letter
Address your letter to the appropriate person.	"Dear Program Director:"
Use the correct name and pronoun. This is a really common error.	If you use a template, please pay extra attention to ensure you are using the correct name and pronoun.
Consider including an opening statement expressing your enthusiasm for writing this letter.	"I volunteered to write this letter because..."
Describe how you know the student and how long you have known him/her.	"I worked with Student A for four weeks on inpatient medicine as her attending physician."
Use specific examples. Comment on medical knowledge, bedside manner, teamwork, procedural skills, motivation and leadership, and other important qualities for residents in their field.	"Student A is an excellent communicator. For example, on rounds, patients directed their questions to Student A instead of the senior resident."
End with a clear summary statement .	"I would recruit this student for my program." "I give this student my highest recommendation." "In my last ten years, this was one of the top 5% of students with whom I have worked."
Include your contact information.	"Feel free to contact me at"
List your job title, academic rank, and hospital affiliation.	Thomas Thumb, MD, PhD Director of Medical Intensive Care Unit Professor of Medicine Wayne State University
Sign and scan the letter. Upload your letter as a PDF.	Before September 15—deadline is the 27th

Lastly, we sincerely appreciate your unwavering dedication to our students and value your time and effort in supporting their residency applications with your LORs. If you would like more specific guidance on any element of the LOR process, please reach out to the Office of Student Affairs:



150 YEARS
IN THE HEART OF DETROIT

Wayne State University School of Medicine
315 Mazurek Education Commons
320 E. Canfield, Detroit, MI 48201
Ph: 313-577-1463 Fax: 313-577-0361

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