

Writing Effective Nomination Letters

Marcy Verduin, M.D.
Associate Dean for Students
Professor of Psychiatry
University of Central Florida College of Medicine

AADPRT Skills Fair 2017

Disclosures

- None

Today We Will Cover:

- Basic Anatomy of a Letter
- Making Your Letter Stand Out
- Maintaining Your Integrity
- Take Home Points

Common Dilemmas in Nomination Letters

- Universal hyperbole
- Insufficient information
- Difficulty tailoring letter to opportunity
- Code words (“highest recommendation” vs “without reservation” vs “with enthusiasm”)
- Problem of cohort (“Best resident in past 10 years”)
- Interpretation of letter length

Anatomy of a Letter

- Strong letters should include ≥ 3 paragraphs:
 - Introduction
 - Body
 - Summary
- Ideally letters (if strong) will go beyond 1 page
(but always check instructions)

Introduction (“Set Up”)

- Formal, specific to purpose
 - Address to specific committee/individual if known
 - State reason for writing
- Include capacity in which you know individual, including length of time
- Provide a strong overview of individual
 - Background/education
 - Brief statement of strengths

Body (“Meat”)

- Specifically address requested criteria
- Provide context for the information in the CV
 - Not helpful to rewrite CV
 - Highlight significance, effectiveness, complexity, success, dedication, etc of accomplishments on CV
- Evaluate skills (e.g., clinical, leadership, research, teaching)
 - Be specific, concrete, especially re: application requirements
 - When possible, provide comparative assessment to others

Body (“Meat”) – cont’d

- Assess fit
 - Personal observations
 - Strengths and vulnerabilities
 - Willingness to accept feedback and capacity for growth
 - Likely contributions to organization/opportunity
- You are effectively building a case for the strength of the recommendation
- If possible, include statement that indicates how you know that this resident will be a good fit for this opportunity

Summary (“Recommendation”)

- Clearly indicate strength of recommendation
 - Use consistent language so readers can interpret
 - When possible, reiterate how individual meets each of the criteria
- Make a statement about individual’s overall potential for award/opportunity, even for the field
- Wrap up with invitation to contact for additional information
- Use formal signature block with title

Not All Nomination Letters are the Same

How can you clearly make your resident stand out from the pack, while maintaining your integrity?

What Makes a Letter Stand Out?

- Weave in a narrative
- Include supporting evidence
 - Quotes from evaluations
 - Publications/presentations
 - Other awards/accolades
- Show vs tell
 - “Bright, hardworking, dedicated” – universal
 - Examples speak volumes
- Make the selection committee’s job easy!

Using Bullets to Highlight Qualifications

Jane is one of our most respected and talented residents, and she has clearly made a difference in three of the Core Values of the UCF Creed:

- Integrity: Jane is well-respected by her peers, a leader in her residency class, and the embodiment of the professionalism of the medical community. Her commitment to integrity is one of the reasons she has been such an effective leader among her peers and in her interactions with the faculty as Chief Resident. Most importantly, she is always respectful and compassionate in her interactions with others, seeking to build relationships and understand others' perspectives in a way that exemplifies the spirit of the medical profession.

Using Bullets (cont'd)

- Scholarship: Jane is one of our most gifted residents, in terms of both medical knowledge and clinical skills. The faculty give her superlative narrative evaluations, and her clinical performance is noted to be on par with that of junior attendings. Jane's research accomplishments are also quite impressive for someone so early in her training, with two first author publications and four presentations at national levels.
- Creativity: Jane thinks outside the box, as evidenced by her ability to build cohesiveness and collaboration in challenging situations. She seeks creative solutions to problems rather than simply complaining to the administration, which has led to the implementation of highly effective "fixes" in our program.

...While Maintaining Your Integrity

- Selection committee may come to recognize your letters
- Reusing same wording for every applicant will:
 - Diminish the meaningfulness of your word
 - Lessen the competitiveness of your resident
- Beware universal hyperbole

If everyone you recommend is “the best resident you’ve ever worked with,” what will you do when that true star comes along?

Pearls for Letter-Writing

- Request copy of CV and any other supporting documents in advance
- Plan before writing
- When your recommendation is exceptionally strong, make that clearly known
 - “highest and most enthusiastic recommendation”
 - “You will not be disappointed.”
 - “exactly the kind of resident that _____ is looking for”
 - “a perfect candidate for _____”
- Risky to ask resident to draft letter for you!

Do's and Don'ts for Letter-Writing

Do:

- Your research
- Use a template
- Adopt a formal style
- Create a compelling story
- Give specific examples
- Include supporting data
- Make the letter longer than 1 page
- Be authentic and honest

Don't:

- Rehash the CV
- State the obvious
- Use vague, generic language
- Use universal descriptors
- Ask resident to draft letter
- Return to same wording for every applicant
- Assume committee knows your “code words”

References

- Balon R. What About Letters in Support of Academic Promotion? *Academic Psychiatry* 2013 37: 2, 142-143.
- Kelley KW & Liles AM. Writing letters of recommendation: Where should you start? *Am J Health-Syst Pharm* 2012 69: 563-565.
- Layde JB. Writing and reading letters of recommendation in Roberts LW (ed). *The Academic Medicine Handbook: A Guide to Achievement and Fulfillment*. 2013 Springer Science and Social Media, New York, chapter 13, 209-212.
- Larkin AGL & Marco CA. Ethics Seminars: Beyond Authorship Requirements—Ethical Considerations in Writing Letters of Recommendation. *Academic Emergency Medicine* 2001; 8:70–73.
- MacLean LM, et al (2011). LoRs in Residency Training: What do they really mean? *Acad Psych*, 35:5, Sept-Oct.
- Prager JD, Myer CM & Pensak ML. Improving the letter of recommendation. *Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery* 2010 143: 327-330.
- Roberts LW & Termuehlen G. (Honest) Letters of Recommendation. *Academic Psychiatry* 2013 37:1, 55-59.
- Wright SM & Ziegelstein RC. Writing More Informative Letters of Reference. *J Gen Intern Med* 2004 19:588–593.

Questions?

marcy.verduin@ucf.edu