

# Suggestions for Writing a Letter of Recommendation

Office of Faculty Affairs  
Office of Student Affairs  
Virginia Tech Carilion School of  
Medicine

# Initial Considerations

- Most letters of recommendation (LoR) will be medical students applying for residency
  - LoR for med students is context of these notes
    - Considerations also apply to: residents applying for fellowship; residents applying for first job; undergrads or grad students applying for med school
    - (Throughout, “he” or “she” will be used instead of “he/she”)
- VTCSOM med students likely to request LoR for:
  - ERAS (Electronic Residency Application Service): AAMC service that processes applications to allopathic residencies
  - VSAS (Visiting Student Application Service): AAMC service that coordinates “away” fourth year clerkships

# Initial Considerations (2)

- It is assumed you know the student
  - If not, and you feel you cannot write a knowledgeable letter, politely decline
    - Exceptions: Chair of Department, Clerkship Director. These leaders will be asked for LoR relevant to the specialty of interest to the student
- Confirm the timeline
  - Student should give you at least 2 weeks to write a LoR
  - You should then meet the timeline
    - Allow yourself at least 1 hour to write a LoR

# Initial Considerations (3)

- Meet with the student
  - Confirm residency interest, eventual goals
    - Not time/place to “advise” regarding specialty choice – presumably the student would have sought counsel earlier
      - Unless you genuinely feel student would not do well in the specialty, in which case you probably should decline to write LoR
  - Get copy of CV and personal statement
  - Confirm AMCAS number (or other identifier)
    - This will appear at the top of the letter
    - Likely included in 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
  - Determine FERPA status (next slide)

# Initial Considerations (4)

- FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act)
  - Federal law regulating use and transmission of student assessments and grades, including LoR
  - For LoR, student decides whether to waive right/privilege to see your letter
    - 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 student so there is no “surprise” question during interview
  - Determine with student whether he waived the right
    - Strong recommendation of VTCSOM that student waive right
    - (Most letter writers insist that student waives his right)

# Initial Considerations (5)

- Meet with student (cont'd)
  - Confirm specifics in CV such as:
    - Advanced degree; such as MPH or PhD
    - Research; such as role in research, publications, grants
    - Other scholarly activity; such as presentations, papers, other writing, courses/sessions taught, conferences
    - Leadership roles; such as class president (even social chairman), representative to national organization
    - Volunteer/extra-curricular activities; such as free clinics, children's camps, interest groups, civic

# Writing the Letter of Recommendation

- Suggestions:
  - Make the letter personal, clear that you really do know the student
    - Include a positive story about her from ward or clinic, or how impressed/pleased you were with a presentation, or how she overcame problems in finishing a research project
    - 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

# Writing the LoR (2)

- Suggestions (cont'd)
  - 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...
  - Always nice to use 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



# Writing the LoR (3)

- Suggestions (cont'd)
  - Avoid certain comments
    - “Best student I’ve ever had!” (even if true, makes the reader wonder about your level of experience)
    - “I’d want him to care for my family!” (really?, a 4<sup>th</sup> year med student?)
    - “You’re missing the boat if you don’t accept her”
    - Terms such as “best,” “great,” “only one”

# Writing the LoR (4)

- A suggestion for organizing the letter
  - This is deliberately NOT a template. Each LoR should read as a new, independently written document and not as a fill-in-the-blank
  - That being said, you might consider an organization of thoughts to include some of the following suggestions – if appropriate

# Writing the LoR (5)

- 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 her; knowledge of applicant
- Next paragraph (or two)
  - Discuss her 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

# Writing the LoR (6)

- 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
    - Again, 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 her good traits)
    - “She might have spoken up a bit more on rounds as she always had something valuable to add.”

# Writing the LoR (7)

- Concluding paragraph
  - Summary. Again, endorse the application.
    - Hard to know whether to use terms such as “recommend highly” or “recommend without reservation” since these may mean different things at different sites
    - May again include personal comments about abilities
  - 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
  - It should be on letterhead paper, not just plain
    - Can use VTC letterhead or specific office/clinic/hospital letterhead
    - Be sure telephone number or e-mail address is included so program can contact you if needed
  - Use spell-check. If you know your grammar is sometimes suspect, have someone else read
    - 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 it gets to the right office to be scanned into the ERAS application (student will have told you this at your meeting)

# Thank You

Both your VTC student and the medical school appreciate your time and effort to reflect positively on VTCSOM