Tips for Writing Letters of Recommendation

Letters of Recommendation comment on strengths of an individual. Weaknesses that may have been identified are omitted. This is different than the letter of reference which is a genuine evaluation.

Generally, residents ask for letters of recommendation for fellowship positions. The first decision is whether you agree to a resident’s request for a letter of recommendation. Tell residents ‘no’ when you have not had enough personal direct observation to enthusiastically recommend them.

If you decide to write the letter for the resident, you should carefully review the resident’s curriculum vita, final personal statement and meet with the resident for fifteen or twenty minutes to understand his/her goals and to develop specific examples of patient care experiences of significance to the resident that you can highlight in your letter.

First paragraph - indicate the purpose of the letter. See model.

Second paragraph - establish your credentials as the author of the letter. It is important to cite your experience in evaluation of young physicians. Give the reader some reason to respect your opinion.

Subsequent paragraphs - outline the positive characteristics of the resident, particularly those that are not thoroughly addressed in the curriculum vita. If there are areas of weakness, these should simply not be addressed.

Share at least one specific story about interactions with the resident to demonstrate you truly know them. In the attached model letter, the author had known this resident from rotations on the endocrinology service and from regular participation in a subspecialty conference. The letter would have been stronger if it cited a specific patient case where the resident demonstrated excellence.

In general, fellowship directors are interested in the following:

a. **Patient Care.** The resident is knowledgeable and competent. He/she will pull his/her own weight and will not need a lot of personal attention. Directors do not want to babysit or hold hands.

b. **Teaching and Research.** The resident will contribute to the other responsibilities of my academic division, notably participation in teaching responsibilities and in our research projects.

c. **Compatibility.** This resident is not going to cause me any difficulties with his/her interpersonal, communications and team skills.
A letter of recommendation should:

- **Not exceed two pages.** It should not repeat materials that are present in the personal statement and the curriculum vita. It should complement these.

- Be **written on University of Illinois College of Medicine letterhead** which can be provided by the resident. This is critical as it increases the competitiveness of the resident who is then seen as completing a university as opposed to a community based program.

- Address as many of these issues as possible in no more than one sentence each: a) patient care, b) research and c) teaching. Even if the applicant has not demonstrated experience in these areas, you can talk about his/her interest in and support of research and teaching going forward.

Last paragraph, **end strongly.** Indicate the **ranking of the resident** compared to others you have observed. If the ranking would be less than the top ten percent, simply indicate that the resident is one of the best you have seen.

Some powerful ending statements:

- He/She improves the attitudes of those around him/her.
- Few if any in my experience have been as well prepared for fellowship in xxx discipline.
- I am confident you will find him/her one of your best candidates.
- Had we a fellowship here, we would aggressively recruit this physician.
- She/He is one of our very best.
- She/He has potential to contribute importantly in our subspecialty of xxx for many years to come.
- She/He will be an asset to the program fortunate enough to recruit him/her.

Be prepared to write several drafts. For assistance in typing, call the Residency Program Office. Consider whether you want the resident to read the letter before mailing. If you can do so, this gives the resident the opportunity to accept or decline the letter. You can simply ask the resident to mail it if he/she wishes. If the resident has waived the right to review the letter, then it should not be shown to the resident. Address and send the letter only to individuals named by the trainee.

*Good luck with this important work!*

Robert W. Kirby, MD, FACP
Emeritus Professor of Medicine
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