

Tips & Strategies for Medical School Reference Letters

In all aspects of your medical school application, your goal is to convince the admissions committee that you have the intelligence, drive and stamina to succeed in their highly competitive program. The stakes are high; of all the talented candidates in the applicant pool, they must give YOU a seat in the class.

A field as complex as medicine requires strengths and abilities that are not easily measured by grades and test scores. That's where third-party reference letters come into play. A great letter supplements the data you've provided about your academic and professional history with independent corroboration of your performance and potential.

A compelling letter also provides a separate function that many candidates fail to consider; it provides critical information about your personality, ethics and integrity that aren't captured anywhere elsewhere in the application. Reference letters from credible third-party sources who can objectively evaluate your character are paramount in the evaluation process. They often play a key role in whether you are invited for a medical school interview or offered a seat in the class.

Candidates don't place much emphasis on their letters of reference for two reasons:

- 1) they don't think they can control their contents
- 2) they don't know what specific steps they should take to improve their references

From our experience, most candidates do not do nearly enough to deliver top-notch recommendations in support of their application. Sadly, most letters we see are short, vague and non-persuasive. In highly competitive situations, they do little to convince us that the candidate is special enough to earn our support. By not taking the initiative with their references, far too many applicants miss a golden opportunity to sell their strengths. The professional implications can be devastating.

Obtaining great letters of reference requires advance planning and hard work, but is well worth the investment. Savvy candidates give this step of the application process the same level of attention as the personal statement.

Who Should Write Your Reference Letters

Medical schools expect to see letters from the following people:

- 1) Your pre-medical committee or adviser
- 2) A science professor
- 3) A supervisor from your clinical or research experience
- 4) Your major professor, if you are a graduate student
- 5) Your supervisor, if you are currently employed

Schools differ in the number of letters they require and accept, with most requiring at least three and accepting no more than five. Carefully read all information the medical schools provide on their applications. They expect you to follow the rules exactly.

A substantive letter of reference has three important features:

- a) The author knows the required intellectual ability and professional effectiveness necessary to succeed in medical school
- b) The author knows the specific candidate well enough to evaluate his/her relevant qualifications
- c) The writer provides not only his overall assessment of the applicant, but enough supporting detail to support his conclusion

Avoid sending letters from teaching assistants, friends, school alumni, relatives, clergymen or politicians UNLESS they personally supervised your professional work and can comment on the specific attributes being evaluated in the medical school admissions process. You'd be surprised how many people fall into this trap, not realizing that it actually hurts their chances. Nearly every year, I read a letter written by a Senator, Governor or famous Hollywood star in support of a candidate they barely know. I'm not impressed. Medical school is serious business, not a popularity contest. We're not star struck enough to give a seat to someone just because her aunt works for the Governor.

Many applicants are surprised that letters from teaching assistants carry little or no weight. The rationale is that they are simply not reputable or knowledgeable sources. We are looking for an honest appraisal of your character from someone with extensive experience in the field. In academia, this includes the tenured faculty.

What The Committee Expects to See

Here's what the committee hopes to learn from your reference letters:

- a) The validity of your claims of academic excellence, professional success and impeccable personal values
- b) Your specific qualifications, including the depth of your academic and professional experiences
- c) Your unique traits that aren't covered anywhere else in the application
- d) Whether you can accurately evaluate others and their perceptions of you
- e) Your demonstrated commitment to pursuing a medical career

Before you ask anyone to write a letter for you, look at the evaluation form the school has asked them to complete. Note that only a few categories involve your GPA or academic performance. In many ways, your reference writers are being asked to describe your character, personality and temperament as valued by medical school admissions committees. Most of these attributes have little to do with your perceived mastery of any specific subject matter; they are intrinsic character traits that govern your behavior in all aspects of your life. Don't dismiss them as irrelevant.

Many applicants believe that as long as they have good grades, they'll get a great recommendation. This simply isn't the case. You'd be stunned to realize the number of professors who have told us horror stories about 4.0 candidates who lie, cheat and steal. We've heard about applicants selling drugs on campus and hiring ringers to take their exams. Some achieved their sterling academic record at the expense of everything else in their life.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that your professors only see your grades. They've been in this business a long time and have seen thousands of students come and go. They know the fine characters from the bad apples and they don't hesitate to tell us who is who. Pick your references carefully and be sure that they are willing to confirm that you are a person of integrity.

How to Ask for a Reference Letter

a) **Timing.** Arrange for your reference letters no later than September in your senior year of college (for those who have already graduated, at least a few months before you submit your AMCAS application). Ideally, ask in the middle, rather than the end, of a semester. At semester's end, most of your professors will be deluged with requests for letters and yours will simply be another in the pack. Increase your odds for a more thorough, personalized reference by requesting it before the big rush.

b) **Approach.** Never simply call or send a form to your writers: always arrange for a personal meeting, if possible, or make a phone call to discuss your request (if the writer is not geographically close). Explain your interest in medicine, your desire to attend medical school and your need for a comprehensive letter of reference. Discuss any issues or concerns the person has about your candidacy.

Verify orally that he is willing to write a "strong letter of support," and not just an average or lukewarm one. If you sense any hesitation, graciously withdraw the request. You are better off asking someone else who can recommend you without reservation. If the person agrees to write a letter, give him the following pieces of information:

- i) A cover letter with the names, addresses and deadlines for all letters you need
- ii) A summary of your professional experience and how you are a good match for medical school
- iii) A current copy of your resume
- iv) Your personal statement
- v) Details of the stories or anecdotes you'd like the writer to mention
- vi) Pre-addressed, stamped envelopes for all letters

c) **Copy of the letter.** Without exception, you should waive the right to see all references letters that are written about you. Admissions committees place little stock in letters that the applicant insists on seeing, as we know that the author is less forthcoming than if the reference was confidential.

d) **Format.** Letters from your premedical advisor should generally be professionally typed and printed on the school's letterhead. Other letters you request may not automatically come in this form. If at all possible, ask your writers to send the letters typed on professional letterhead with a laser-jet or inkjet printer.

e) **Follow-up.** Two weeks after a writer agrees to send the reference letter, verify that it reached its destination. If it hasn't, ask him to send a second copy. Send a thank-you note to each person who wrote a letter on your behalf.

f) **Writing Your Own.** Increasingly (over the past several years), we've heard stories of candidates whose harried bosses were overwhelmed by the request to write a letter of recommendation. The applicants were instead instructed to write the letter themselves and simply submit it to the "author" for a signature. Most applicants consider this a dream come true. After all, what could be better than a chance to "toot your own horn" under the guise of being your own boss or major professor?

Sadly, most candidates haven't a clue what an excellent reference letter looks like. To assume the perspective and tone of someone in your recommender's position requires experience and perspicacity. Most letters written by the actual candidates are embarrassingly easy to spot: they are timid, stilted and one-dimensional. They include far too many details that a real reference letter wouldn't mention and they frequently are identical in tone to the candidate's own writing. We nearly automatically discount candidates who do this and make a mental note of the individual who supposedly wrote the reference. In a few cases, we've contacted them and they confirmed our suspicions.

We strongly discourage you from trying this approach. Remember, the admissions committee has viewed thousands of letters and has an excellent feel for authenticity. We want ethical candidates who offer a balanced, honest appraisal of their credentials. Rather than writing the letter yourself, ask someone else who will take the time to write a reference that genuinely reflects your suitability for the program.

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