Some Issues & Questions on Writing Letters of Recommendation/Evaluation
Examples are taken from letters written by Pomona College faculty and staff
Paula Goldsmid, Pomona College Teaching & Learning Center, 2/25/14

A great resource: Free, online updated version of Joe Schall’s Writing Recommendation Letters https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationletersonline/

To write or not to write?
Do you write for all who ask? Or only for those who meet certain criteria? How to help students decide whether you are an appropriate person to write?

Whether, Why, When, and How to say No?
If it’s not possible to write a strong recommendation, do you resort to “Isn’t there someone who knows you better?” More difficult but also potentially more helpful: an honest conversation about why you should not write, in which the student may learn something important. And- if you don’t write the letter, do you have any further responsibility to the student?

What to require of those for whom you write?
Advance notice, materials to submit, etc. How to make your life easier by requiring the student to provide relevant information to the application? This can help the student organize her/his ‘story’ as well as help you manage the process.

How to direct your letter to the purpose at hand?
Know what the selection/admissions committee is looking for. Read over the application materials student provides. Target your letter and examples to the criteria stated or implied.

Must the letter start “I have known Cecil Sagehen since ...”? Why not catch the reader’s attention early, then go on to the facts of your relationship with the applicant:
--X is just the kind of student you want in a class: smart, passionately curious and intellectually engaged....
--I am delighted to write this recommendation letter for X. I know him as a charismatic, imaginative student, keenly intelligent with an excellent ability to communicate ideas....
--X explodes every stereotype the ungenerous might harbor toward [premeds]
--X is the kind of smart, capable, responsible student who seems destined to be put in charge of things, to be counted on when it counts,
--X’s remarkable journey began in ....
--To meet X is to be reminded that there are still altruists in the world. She is deeply, passionately, committed to medicine, to a life spent in healing and selfless care for others.

Superlatives? Lead with them, don’t hide them.
If you bury them in later paragraphs or save for the closing, the reader may never see them.
--It is no exaggeration to say that X is one of the most extraordinary students I have taught in my Y years at Pomona College.
--I have never before written a recommendation letter where the candidate and the opportunity were such a perfect fit...
--Perhaps the most memorable discussion I’ve ever had with a student about a decision to switch majors was three years ago. ...[details that reflect well on X] That student was X.
--It is difficult to do justice to X in a brief letter without seeming hyperbolic....
--I have written dozens of medical school recommendations for students during my twenty-plus years of full-time teaching at the collegiate level, including many that were successful applicants to the best programs in the country. It is with that perspective that I say X is among the two or three students who, in my experience, are best positioned and best suited for a successful career in medicine in terms of intellectual ability, people skills, and genuine compassion for others.

Concluding:
--I realize that my praise may sound over the top, but it’s not; if anything I am underplaying X’s intellectual energy and manifold academic abilities. Perhaps that is the best way of explaining why I am so delighted to recommend her to you and with such great enthusiasm.

No superlatives? Highlight strengths, and open with them if it works:
--X is one of those students who will find a way to achieve her goals through sheer perseverance and effort.
--Although X struggled to see his own potential earlier in his college career, encouragement from his advisor, coupled with his own growing desire to succeed, transformed this once tentative student into ...
--X was an active participant in the course, offering comments even when he wasn’t sure he was right, which is something not many students are willing to do.
--Upon initially meeting X, I was taken by his passion and the exuberance with which he communicated. ...
--X’s most striking quality, in my opinion....
--I have never encountered a more hard-working student than X.
--I am inspired by X’s energy and dedication to pursuing....
--In an intense group of twenty active, often quite talented students, X was easily among those who got the most out of the course....

**Follow instructions to discuss both strengths and weaknesses?**
“...Please do not hesitate to speak of the applicant’s limitations as well as strong points. Committees tend naturally to be dubious of appraisals that imply a given individual has no limitations whatever.”
Opinions vary on how to handle this. Selection committees are skeptical of letters so effusive and unqualified in their praise that the applicant comes across as too good to be true. Don’t hesitate to point out areas where the applicant could stand improvement. But don’t overdo it and make reviewers wonder why you agreed to write the letter in the first place.

**How to focus on the student while providing important context?**
Your course is fascinating, extremely demanding, and very special, but it’s not the subject of the letter. Claims about the course should be backed up by a few specifics that illustrate what makes this course, e.g. “at the level of a graduate seminar”? What are the students required to do? What makes this particular student’s performance in this course noteworthy?

**How to choose the best Words to represent the student’s qualifications?**
Maximize verbs, minimize adjectives except when accompanied by examples. The best letters enable the reader to see the student doing something, whether physical, mental, or emotional.
The effects of particular words on particular individuals may vary. What do you think about these-?
Driven... Indefatigable ... Tenacious... Tireless ... Zealous... Absolutely dogged in pursuit of knowledge

*“Feel free to contact me if you’d like more information about X”*?
This has become a somewhat formulaic closing, but in some quarters may be seen as code for “Call me- there are things I don’t want to put in writing”. Readers will be able to find you if they want to or need to.
Accentuating the positive:

It has been a great pleasure to watch _____ grow academically over the last two years. As a freshman, _____ struggled with Bio 40. I remember calling _____ into my office after the first test to ask how I could help him. For the rest of the semester, he was a regular visitor to my office hours and took advantage of the tutors, mentors and TAs in the course. He ended up with a very respectable B.………. He has the academic talent and interpersonal skills that will enable him to continue to grow intellectually and personally.

…..Being a great doctor requires more. It requires genuine caring and dedication. I see these two very important qualities in ____ and being a student at Pomona, I know his academic caliber is of the highest quality. Through the tough times, ____ has pulled himself up and moved toward his goal when most others would have quit. When ____ puts his mind to something, I have no doubt that he will accomplish it. The highest commendation I can give is to say that I would trust taking my child to a doctor as compassionate and devoted as ____

His papers improved consistently over the course of the three semesters. Thing did not come easy for ____, his achievements are a tribute to diligence and tenacity. He has native intelligence he is highly motivated and a person of commitment and sincerity.

I was impressed with the perseverance, persistence, flexibility, resourcefulness and drive…..

…he did contribute to discussions from time to time, a daunting prospect for many students in view of the large size of the class.

As his grades indicate, ____ struggled in this course. His difficulties came in keeping up with the large amount of new material and fast pace that is associated with this course. In one-on-one situations, ____ impressed me as a bright individual who was able to think on his feet and solve problems. It could very well be that his performance in the class was coupled with a particularly difficult semester, although this is pure speculation on my part. Clearly, the sum total of his academic experiences has to be taken into consideration when evaluating him for admission to a professional school. My impression of him as a sophomore is that he was a capable person who was in the process of finding his academic legs. This “finding process” was probably a consequence of his level of preparation prior to coming to Pomona College. Pomona enrolls some of the best and brightest undergraduates in the country, and ____ belongs in this group—perhaps just not at the head of the pack. I have no doubt that he will be able to succeed , as his motivation for studying ____ …...

Perhaps from his experiences playing [varsity sport] , ____ is someone who is “highly coachable.” While he may not understand the correct way to analyze a graph or table the first time around, he readily seeks out help to improve his performance. There were several periods last spring when ____ came to my office hours several times a week to revise his semester-long survey research project. The final product showed tremendous improvement over earlier drafts, in terms of both substance and form.

The committee will note from ____’s record that she is a student with modest grades. I think it is also important to note, however, that ____ shows real intellectual leadership, which is a slightly different thing. Unlike many students, who seek guidance because of preoccupation about grades, ____ has always seemed very focused on getting to the heart of intellectual issues and on understanding social problems. For example, [describes incident]. ____ is a committed and serious scholar who takes interesting sorts of intellectual risks and is developing a clear vision of her talents and goals…..

____ is among the hardest working and most conscientious students I have known at Pomona

What distinguishes this applicant from others with high GPAs?

In a class of twenty, ____ immediately stood out as the top student; he was the only student to have earned the grade of A on all his essays, and one of only two to earn a grade of A in class participation. He was the only student to earn an A in the class
distinguished himself by his extraordinary performance in this very demanding and rigorous course.

He easily falls into the top three percent of students that I have taught in the last twelve years.

Among the students I have recommended to ______, I would rank him among the very top, for the rarity of acuity and maturity he displays.

I am writing in enthusiastic support of _____’s application for admission to medical school. I have worked with _____ in the context of one course and have known him for a period of two and one-half years. What a remarkable individual!

During 3 of his semesters at Pomona, he took an extremely heavy course load with 5 challenging courses.

_____ finished the first semester of organic chemistry with a "A" letter grade and was ranked 5/90 students in terms of accumulated lecture points. She was one of only six students in the class who secured top marks in both the lecture and laboratory components of the course.

In my seven years at Pomona College, I have met only a handful of students who get grades such as these and still project a sense of calm and reserve.

_____ is easily one of the strongest students that I have worked with in recent years.

**When you don't know enough:**

……..I hope you will consider _____ for your program. While my own interactions with her do not provide a clear basis for judging her specific qualifications as a pre-medical student, I believe that she would give her heart and soul to medicine. [is this letter going to help the applicant? should it have been written?]

Because _____ is so quiet in class, and did not seek me out for conversations outside class, I cannot attest to her motivation or aptitude for medicine beyond what I have read in her personal statement. This statement attests to her absolute devotion to her family--her mother, and her failing grandmother--during a term at Pomona that presented exceptional academic challenges. She was enrolled in my _____ class at the time, a class that requires many hours outside normal class hours for group work in ______ project. Her performance was so outstanding, so absolutely accomplished, that I never guessed the strain she was experiencing. Nor did she utter one word of complaint to her fellow students or to me. Such compassion and devotion, such grit and grace under pressure, are sterling qualifications for the future practice of medicine.

“**Discuss the candidate’s weaknesses as well as strengths....**”

Part of what has made ____unique are the challenges she has faced. When I first had ____ in class, difficult family circumstances had turned her world upside down and, as a result, she was sometimes moody and sensitive to criticism. Last year these outside pressures increased. Although she still has a somewhat “artistic” temperament, these tests of her inner strength over the past few years have helped forge in her an emotional maturity that more closely matches her intellectual abilities......Having gone through several crucibles of her own, ____ is ready for the personal and intellectual challenges a year on a _____ fellowship would provide as well as the rewards it would certainly offer.

**What about these statements— (how) would you have said it?**

Unlike the typical Pomona student, ____ always participated in class discussions and usually offered interesting perspectives on the topic under discussion. In addition, she was one of the few students who sought my advice concerning how to research particular topics and prepare seminar presentations.

In fact, she was one of the few students I could always count on to be well prepared for class

I really believe she is a winner. Actually she is the only African-American student I have seen majoring and succeeding in the sciences without neglecting her physical and spiritual life.
This page is for students who are planning to ask me (or have already asked me) to write a letter of recommendation for them for REU applications, summer internships, graduate school admissions etc.

First off, do you really want ME to write a letter for you? It is in general useful to consider the following before you ask someone for a letter:

1. Does this person have a reason to have a positive impression of you? (In my case, for instance, this may translate into: Did you take a course from me and do well? Or maybe you worked on an independent project with me and did well? Did you grade for me or mentor a course I was teaching?)

2. Is the person familiar with your work? (In my case, for instance, this may translate into: Do I know what your senior thesis / REU project was about, or given a good summary, can I say anything intelligent about it?)

3. Is this letter going to be relevant to your application? (In my case, for instance, this may translate into: Does having a letter from your mathematics instructor help you with your application for a congressional internship in Washington DC? Does a letter from me count for your application to get a part time job at the Natural History museum? Note that your answer to these questions may be yes or no depending on what you want the letter to be about).

If you have already decided that you want a letter from me, please feel free to email me and make an appointment to chat about it.

If I have agreed to write a recommendation for you, please give me a folder containing
  • a copy of your transcript,
• a copy of your personal statement (if applicable),
• all necessary forms, and
• addressed envelopes.

**About your rights to access to letters written on your behalf:**

In the recommendation forms you turn in to me, please look for and check the box that says **I waive my right to read this letter**

If you want to see a letter written on your behalf, sometimes just asking the recommenders will work, and at other times, you just will not see them.

However, if you do waive your right, the letters are taken to be a bit more objective and thus are more believable and effective.

If this is an issue for you, please do let me know and we can talk about it.

Furthermore, at least **two weeks** before the first letter is due, e-mail me your answers to the following questions (the more details the better):

1. What is your name, year, and major?
2. What are you applying for? (scholarship, graduate school, etc.)
3. List the programs to which you are applying, together with due dates.
4. How long have I known you (years/months), and what is my relationship(s) to you (instructor, advisor, etc.)? Have you graded or mentored for me? If so, for what class(es) and when?
5. For what class(es) have I had you, what final grade(s) did I assign you, and how did you distinguish yourself in my class(es)?
6. How would you describe yourself?
7. What are some of your academic accomplishments?
8. What are some of your nonacademic accomplishments?
9. What makes me particularly qualified to write a letter for you?
10. What makes you particularly qualified for this position/honor/award?
11. What do you expect / hope you will contribute to the program you are applying for?
12. What are your long term goals and will this position/honor/award help? If so, how?
13. Additional comments (REU's, summer research, interesting jobs, hobbies, etc.)?

Please **send me e-mail reminders** as deadlines approach, and feel free to chat with me about other ways you can make the letter writing process go as smoothly as possible for you and your letter writers.

And of course, Good luck!

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This page was largely inspired by Mike Orrison's page [here](http://www.math.wustl.edu/~morrison/) and his article [here](http://www.math.wustl.edu/~morrison/other/letters.html).

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**Contact Information**

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Thank you for agreeing to write a letter of evaluation for a medical school applicant!

The following guidelines aim to improve the letter writing process in order to benefit both letter writers and admissions committees. They are organized into two sections that describe (1) tips about how to write a letter and (2) key areas of interest to medical schools.

How to use the guidelines
Please note that use of these guidelines is optional. They are intended to help you think about your letter and facilitate the writing process.

Medical schools do not expect any one letter writer to provide information about every characteristic of an applicant. In fact, they require multiple letters specifically because no one letter writer is expected to know everything about an applicant.

A Special Note for Writers of Committee Letters
Medical schools value committee letters because they provide an integrated and institutional perspective on an applicant's readiness for medical school. They provide a comprehensive evaluation of applicants based on direct observation and the synthesis of information provided by faculty and others at an institution. This integrated perspective provides unique and valuable information about applicants.

While we recognize that many committee letters already incorporate the concepts included in these guidelines and key areas of interest, we believe that the material provided here can only complement the current committee letter process by enhancing its effectiveness. Those who work with individual letter writers can use these guidelines and key areas of interest as educational tools to encourage greater focus in individual letters. Writers of committee letters may also wish to re-fashion the overarching committee letter produced by their school to more closely reflect the central points provided here.

Additional Information
For more information on the AAMC admissions initiative:
http://www.aamc.org/ai

For more information about holistic admissions and mission-based efforts to promote diversity, visit the Holistic Review Project website:
https://www.aamc.org/initiatives/holisticreview/
1. Provide an accurate assessment of the applicant’s suitability for medical school rather than advocate for the applicant.

2. Briefly explain your relationship with the applicant:
   - how long you have known the applicant;
   - in what capacity you have interacted (e.g., faculty, pre-medical advisor, supervisor, etc.); and
   - whether you are writing based on direct or indirect observations.

3. Quality is more important than letter length. Focus on the applicant rather than details about the lab, course, assignment, job or institution.

4. Only include information on grades, GPA or MCAT scores if you are providing context to help interpret them. Grades, GPA, and MCAT scores are available within the application.

5. Focus on behaviors that you have observed directly when describing applicants’ suitability for medical school. Consider describing:
   - The situation or context of the behavior
   - The actual behavior(s) you observed
   - Any consequences of that behavior

6. Admissions committees find comparison information helpful. If you make comparisons, be sure to provide context. Include information about:
   - the comparison group (e.g., students in a class you taught, students in your department, co-workers, etc.)
   - your rationale for the final comparison

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**Guidelines**

**Key Areas of Interest**

**A.) Unique Contributions to the Incoming Class**
- Describe obstacles that the applicant had to overcome, and if applicable, how those obstacles led to new learning and growth
- Explain how the applicant may contribute to a medical school’s diversity, broadly defined (e.g., background, attributes, experiences, etc.)

*Note. If you write about any information that could be considered potentially sensitive, confirm with the applicant that s/he is comfortable with the inclusion of that information.*

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**B.) Core, Entry-level Competencies**

Describe how the applicant has, or has not, demonstrated any of the following competencies that are necessary for success in medical school.

**Thinking & Reasoning Competencies**

**Critical Thinking:** Uses logic and reasoning to identify the strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions, conclusions, or approaches to problems

**Quantitative Reasoning:** Applies quantitative reasoning and appropriate mathematics to describe or explain phenomena in the natural world

**Scientific Inquiry:** Applies knowledge of the scientific process to integrate and synthesize information, solve problems and formulate research questions and hypotheses; is facile in the language of the sciences and uses it to participate in the discourse of science and explain how scientific knowledge is discovered and validated

**Written Communication:** Effectively conveying information to others using written words and sentences

**Oral Communication:** Effectively conveys information to others using spoken words and sentences; listens effectively; recognizes potential communication barriers and adjusts approach or clarifies information as needed

**Science Competencies**

**Living Systems:** Applies knowledge and skill in the natural sciences to solve problems related to molecular and macro systems

**Human Behavior:** Applies knowledge of the self, others, and social systems to solve problems related to the psychological, social, and biological factors that influence health and well-being

**Interpersonal Competencies**

**Service Orientation:** Demonstrates a desire to help others and sensitivity to others’ needs and feelings; demonstrates a desire to alleviate others’ distress; recognizes and acts on his/her responsibilities to society, locally, nationally, and globally

**Social Skills:** Demonstrates awareness of others’ needs, goals, feelings, and the ways social and behavioral cues affect peoples’ interactions and behaviors; adjusts behaviors appropriately in response to these cues; and treats others with respect

**Cultural Competence:** Demonstrates knowledge of social and cultural factors that affect interactions and behaviors; shows an appreciation and respect for multiple dimensions of diversity; recognizes and acts on the obligation to inform one’s own judgment; engages diverse and competing perspectives as a resource for learning, citizenship, and work; recognizes and appropriately addresses bias in themselves and others; interacts effectively with people from diverse backgrounds

**Teamwork:** Works collaboratively with others to achieve shared goals; shares information & knowledge with others and provides feedback; puts team goals ahead of individual goals

**Written Communication:** Effectively conveys information to others using spoken words and sentences; listens effectively; recognizes potential communication barriers and adjusts approach or clarifies information as needed

**Intrapersonal Competencies**

**Ethical Responsibility to Self and Others:** Behaves in an honest and ethical manner; cultivates personal and academic integrity; adheres to ethical principles and follows rules and procedures; resists peer pressure to engage in unethical behavior and encourages others to behave in honest and ethical ways; and develops and demonstrates ethical and moral reasoning

**Reliability and Dependability:** Consistently fulfills obligations in a timely and satisfactory manner; takes responsibility for personal actions and performance

**Resilience and Adaptability:** Demonstrates tolerance of stressful or changing environments or situations and adapts effectively to them; is persistent, even under difficult situations; recovers from setbacks

**Capacity for Improvement:** Sets goals for continuous improvement and for learning new concepts and skills; engages in reflective practice for improvement; solicits and responds appropriately to feedback
Letters of recommendation are an important part of your application. Letters can reveal important aspects of your potential as a medical student that cannot be gleaned from your grades and test scores: in particular, your communication skills, interpersonal skills, and intellectual curiosity.

**Who Shall I Ask?**

1. **Academic:** Use Request for Faculty/Staff Letter of Evaluation form. Develop good relationships with your professors. Ask questions in class, visit their office hours, keep in touch after your class has finished. Most medical schools want letters from two people who have taught you in BCPM courses, normally in two different subjects, and one person who has taught you in a non-science subject.

   Ideally select writers who can evaluate you in the context of experience with other Pomona or 5C students, but a letter from someone who was here on a temporary appointment is OK if necessary. This still counts as an “inside” letter because they taught you here. In unusual circumstances a letter from a lab coordinator will suffice, but normally letters should come from Pomona or other 5C faculty. Other things equal, a person who has taught here longer is preferable, but most important is choosing people who know your work best.

   Don’t start by thinking “Who gave me my best grades?” Instead focus on the classes in which you gained the most, and in which the professor knows what it took to make that progress. A letter that highlights your hard work and persistence in a subject that was difficult for you, demonstrating how you pulled yourself up from a C to a B during the semester, can carry a lot of weight.

   If applying for MD-PhD, DO-PhD, DVM-PhD or any other research-intensive program, letters from research supervisors are important, and can be submitted along with other academic letters or later on.

2. **Non-Academic:** Use Request for Outside Letter of Evaluation. A letter from your supervisor in a volunteer activity or internship is a valuable addition to your file. Request these letters as soon as you finish the project and ask the Health Sciences Office to start a file for you. Don’t wait until you’re ready to apply; high turnover in some organizations may leave you without anyone who knew you during your work there a couple of years ago.

   If the person who writes is not someone who observes your work day-to-day, e.g. a Volunteer Coordinator, take the initiative to keep that person informed so they can write a fuller letter. Make an appointment part way through your activity to say you’ll be asking for a letter and to talk about what you’re learning: what’s interesting, what’s challenging, and most important what you’re learning about yourself. Make another appointment near the end of the activity to discuss how the experience has helped you think about your future. Letters that include some detail about what you’ve gained, and how, are much more valuable than those simply reporting the number of hours you were there.

   Letters from famous or important people are not useful unless the person has actually observed your work.

**How Shall I Ask?**

**At The Right Time And Place:** Do not ask when passing in the hallway or by sending a casual email. Faculty will often automatically say Yes without considering whether they’re a good choice, which is something you need to discuss with them. Request the letter as far in advance as possible, and never less than three weeks before it’s due.

**Provide All Necessary Information:** Make an appointment with each writer to discuss your interest in the profession you aspire to enter, and how your ideas have developed since you studied or worked with them. Tell potential recommenders why you have selected them, and who else will write for you. Provide information (save your academic work!) to remind them of the work you did under their supervision. Give them a draft of your personal statement. Give each writer a copy of the appropriate Request for Letter form posted on the medsci web.

**Leave Room For "No":** Ask each potential recommender if he or she can write the kind of letter you need. If a person seems reluctant after you have provided all relevant information, accept this and move on. If someone is too busy to write a thoughtful letter, or does not know you well enough, their letter will not be as helpful as you’d like.