

Recommendations for letters of recommendation

It is a responsibility and an honor when a dental student asks one of their faculty for a letter of recommendation. The student trusts their professor to represent them with a well-designed and considerate letter. Beyond format and grammar, it is very important to systematically write letters that illustrate the qualities of the student that make them a strong candidate for the residency or position that they desire. Balance that with tactful honesty.

It is very important for faculty to support for their students and graduates. Schools and faculty benefit when higher numbers of graduates are accepted to residencies and associateships. Schools with higher levels of acceptance attract more competitive applicants. While the following statement is not supported by evidence, it follows that successful graduates are more likely to support their alma maters. For faculty who would like to help their students and graduates, here is a rubric for an effective recommendation letter.

Start by asking the student for their resume and personal statement. These documents will provide substance for letters when the writer is not as familiar with the student or if the applicant is a graduate who has not been in touch. It is a good practice to ask everyone who requests a letter for these documents, not only the ones that the writer does not know well or does not remember. In this way, every requester will feel equally considered by the letter writer. Additionally, we may learn something about the student that surprises us.

Consider the letter to be a thorough description of the applicant. The best letters will include first hand observations and information that augments or emphasizes items in the resume. Include information that may not be in a resume. Be honest. Let the applicant know if it is not possible to write a strong recommendation. Some applicants may accept that kind of letter. Reasons may include that the requested writer is very highly considered by others; a weak recommendation from a strong instructor has value in some situations. Alternatively, the applicant may have been turned down by others and require a letter for an application.

Open the letter with the appellation, "To whom it may concern:" The writer may have the name of a particular person to address such as a residency director or other administrator. It is not acceptable to write a letter that is too familiar if the writer knows the recipient.

The first paragraph states the purpose of the letter. The first sentence introduces the subject of the letter. The second sentence is a short biography of the writer. The balance of the paragraph explains how the writer knows the applicant and for how long. End this paragraph with a sentence that asks for the decision that supports the student's application.

To whom it may concern:

I am writing to support John Smith's application for your orthodontic residency. I am the clinic instructor who supervised this student and advised the student on academics for over 2 years. This is a strong student with qualities that you will value in a resident in your program.

Tell a personal story about the student. Was there a time that the student did something outstanding? Did they help a patient or another student? Were they instrumental in a volunteer program? Research? This story should only be a single paragraph.

In another paragraph, write about the way the student interacts with their patients. Are they especially professional? Are they friendly and supportive? What do patients think of this applicant?

In another paragraph, write about the student interacts with other students. Is the student collaborative? Are they competitive? Is the applicant a leader? Does the applicant join and participate in

groups? The applicants resume will list their activities, but it will not show that the student worked hard on a project or showed up for every event. The resume will not demonstrate that the applicant was popular or respected.

How does the student interact with faculty, and what do instructors think of the applicant? You are the person writing this letter. It is helpful if the writer represents the opinions of others.

Some faculty and administrators like to see the way the student rates compared to others. It may be appropriate to write that a student is in the “top 20% of students in their practice” or “this student is in the top 20% of students who follow up with their patients.”

The final paragraph is a conclusion. Summarize the contents of the letter in a few sentences. Include a sentence that summarizes this recommendation of the applicant. “I highly recommend this applicant for this residency.” Or “I recommend this applicant for this residency.” Or if it is not possible to recommend this applicant, leave this sentence out; allow the reader to infer your opinion based on the absence of this statement. End by asking for the admissions committee or the administrator to accept your applicant.