



Faculty and Community Members: Letter Writing Guidelines for Professional Healthcare Schools

First, *thank you in advance* for your important role in supporting Vanderbilt students who aspire to become future healthcare professionals. Often it can be difficult to write a quality letter of evaluation (*recommendation*) for students when given little guidance about how your evaluation is utilized by professional schools in the healthcare application process.

These guidelines below are designed to help facilitate the writing process and provide you with helpful information and tips on how to:

- ✓ Format the letter.
- ✓ Highlight your knowledge of a Vanderbilt student applicant.
- ✓ Submit the letter.

Professional Schools do not expect any *one* letter writer to provide information pertaining to *every* characteristic or speak to all qualities of an applicant. Please note that the use of these guidelines are optional and not intended to prescribe your writing methods.

Letter of Evaluation (*Recommendation*) Format Tips:

Please be sure to:

1. Write your letter of recommendation on **official letterhead**.
2. Include your **contact information**: telephone number, email address, office location.
3. **Sign** the letter.
4. **Save signed letter as a PDF**. Most professional schools utilize various centralized, online application system services for their professional application submission. Often the application portals require/offer an electronic, digital letter of recommendation submission option for the letter writer to directly upload. Most application portals recommend a PDF format when uploading the letter.

Letter of Evaluation (*Recommendation*) Writing Tips:

1. **Address your initial greeting in the letter with a general format** (not a specific, individual name of a professional program or admissions committee). *Why?*
Many individual letters are read by multiple, *separate* professional school admissions committees *if* the candidate is applying to more than one professional school. Overall, it is best to address your letter in a more general manner. (e.g., Dear Admissions Committee, To Whom It May Concern, etc.)
2. Provide an accurate **assessment of the applicant's suitability for professional school** (medical,

dental, physician assistant, optometry, etc.) rather than advocate for the applicant or focus the letter on your personal credentials.

3. Briefly **explain your relationship** to the applicant and consider:
 - How long have you known the individual?
 - Capacity you have interacted with them (faculty, supervisor, etc.).
 - Are you writing based on direct or indirect observations?
4. **Quality is more important** than the length of the letter.
5. **Only include information on grades, GPA or MCAT/DAT (exam required) if you provide context to help interpret them.** Remember – grades, GPA and MCAT/DAT scores are already available within the application for the admissions committee.
6. **Focus on behaviors that you have observed directly** when describing a candidate’s suitability for professional school. Please review the “Core, Entry-Level Competencies” below for some ways to brainstorm your specific, evaluative letter content.
7. Admissions committees find comparison information helpful. ***If you make comparisons, please be sure to provide context*** and 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.

Areas of Interest to Health Professional Schools:

Professional School Admissions Committees find great value in:

- Unique contributions to the incoming class.
- Describing obstacles that the student has had to overcome, and if applicable, how those obstacles led to new learning and self-growth.
- Explain how the applicant may uniquely contribute to a professional school’s team-based learning environment, broadly defined. (e.g., background, attributes, experiences, etc.)

Core, Entry-Level Competencies:

- Thinking and Reasoning Competencies – critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, scientific inquiry and written communication abilities.
- Science Competencies – abilities to apply knowledge in the living systems and human behavior.
- Interpersonal Competencies – service orientation, social skills, cultural competency, teamwork and oral communication abilities.
- Professional Competencies – commitment to learning, cultural awareness/humility, empathy, ethical responsibility to self and others, interpersonal skills, oral communication, reliability and dependability, resilience/adaptability, service orientation and teamwork/collaboration.

For full context, please review the “Additional Sources” below.

Additional Tips:

- ✓ Please be sure to **change your e-mail setting/filter and check your junk mail**. This is to ensure the online, emailed official letter of recommendation request directly from the application portal (not the student) does not inadvertently end up in your junk mail versus your inbox.
- ✓ **Please do not ask the student to upload the letter** on your behalf as the instructions on the professional application portals *do not* allow this.
- ✓ As a courtesy, **please consider a follow-up communication with the candidate once your submission has been completed**. Often candidates may professionally follow up when appropriate. Taking this courtesy step is often greatly appreciated to ensure smooth communication with your mentee.
- ✓ Note: Once you have uploaded the letter via the provided instructions, candidates often can directly log-in and check their own application portal to ensure it did arrive safely within a few business days or with the individual professional school (if the professional school does not use an online national application portal).

Note: Guidelines provided *adapted* from the [AAMC Guidelines for Writing a Letter of Evaluation for a Medical School Applicant](#).

Additional Sources:

[AAMC Pre-Med Core Competencies & Resources](#)

[AAMC Holistic Review in Medical School Admissions](#)

