



Letters of Reference

In general, many health professions schools need at least *three letters* of recommendation (2 from science faculty and 1 non-science). You should have more than 3 letters available as some medical schools are open to receiving more than three letters but remember, it is not the quantity of letters that is important but rather, the quality of these letters.

Always have more than the three basic letters available because some medical schools are open to receiving more than three letters. Additionally, you may find yourself in a situation where one of your science letters is from your PI (Principal Investigator) in the laboratory where you volunteer and though this letter is a science related letter, it still may not be acceptable to a medical school. You will then need to submit a letter from a professor from a science course that you have taken and by the time that you need to obtain a letter from a professor, it might be too late and more importantly, too difficult to obtain.

Letters should include comments about general intelligence, oral and written communication skills, ability to deal with complex and abstract ideas and evidence of being a lifelong independent learner. A letter that merely states the grade earned by an applicant in class has very limited value. Comments on the applicant's exposure to the realities of medicine are also very valuable.

For clarification, a committee packet or committee letter IS NOT a packet of letters that is composed when your professors gather together and write the letter about you and then forward to a medical school. For some students, there exists an impression that this constitutes a committee packet. The committee packet is typically a composite letter that is written by the Pre-Med/Pre-Health Advisor on behalf of several faculty members who interview an applicant to medical school. We do not offer this service. However, if you are applying to schools that request such a letter, the pre-health advisor has a letter explaining that we do not have such a service.

The Center for Career & Professional Advancement offers a Letters of Reference File service for students and alumni. The primary purpose of the Letters of Reference File is to serve as a convenience for those who write your recommendations. Rather than write a separate letter for each of the many programs to which you apply, the author writes one letter which remains on file for your use whenever you need it. Once established, the file can become a reliable repository for all subsequent letters of reference throughout your academic career. Many academic institutions expect your references to be in such a file, and there is a certain advantage from the "halo effect" of having your recommendations arrive under the University of California cover. For more information about the Center for Career & Professional Advancement Letters of Reference Service, click [here](#). The Center for Career & Professional Advancement is located in SSB 230 and can be reached at 209.228.7272 or at careercenter@ucmerced.edu.

Guidelines for Health Professions School Letters of Reference

Health professions schools are interested in recommendations which come from professors, research supervisors, etc., who know the student and his/her academic work *well*. The more the evaluation reflects real knowledge of the student and his/her performance, the more

useful the letter is to both the school and the student. Letters which say little more than what the student received for a grade are of very limited value. Comments which help to put the student's performance in perspective and make clear the letter writer's opportunity to evaluate the student are very helpful. For example, comments concerning the grading scale or the level at which the class is taught may make your evaluation more meaningful.

These guidelines were prepared to help evaluators structure their letters to emphasize the information that medical schools need to select future health professionals, which is not entirely the same as choosing graduate students. The issue is *health care*, not research, so applicants must be able to deal with patients as well as understand the basics of medical science. The general categories below reflect this. You may not be in a position to comment upon every facet discussed below, but it is helpful to know what they are.

- Provide the student's full name on the letter.
- Describe the nature of your relationship to the applicant, how well and for how long you have known him or her.

Then, discuss what you can of the following topics, using **concrete examples** or **personal knowledge**.

- Motivation and discipline: How responsible, determined, focused is the applicant? Did she have to work to get where she is or support herself financially? Overcome personal struggles? Was his preparation for college weak and he had to catch up? Was an appropriate amount of initiative taken in designing an independent lab project or other student-driven assignment? Did he or she go beyond the required reading? Was needed advice sought out, and how was criticism taken? How well were suggestions for paper or thesis revisions handled? Is the student a leader or a follower? Do you know of any tangible examples of commitment to people, to health care?
- Personal aptitude for a health professions career: To what degree does the applicant demonstrate personal qualities such as integrity, honesty, maturity, empathy, kindness, altruism? How are his/her social skills? Degree of social/cultural awareness? How did the person interact with faculty, lab group members, or conference participants? What about written or oral communication skills? Did the applicant contribute to conferences in a way that assisted in effective discussion, or did he or she take over? Did the student work well with lab partners, fulfill responsibilities to the group's efforts?
- Academic strengths and weaknesses not obviously evident from the record: What are the applicant's intellectual capabilities? Performance on thesis orals or in other unusually demanding situations? Can you comment on the degree of intellectual depth and rigor in the student's choice of courses? Broad or narrow interests, level of general curiosity and likelihood of being a lifelong learner? Mention unusual or particularly pertinent features of the course(s) (e.g. some graduate level material; group learning activities; oral presentations; independent work). If you are comfortable with giving a ranking, do so, or note the average course grade or if the applicant excels at a certain kind of thinking or analysis.
- How comfortable would you be having the applicant as your physician/dentist/pharmacist, etc? Can you compare the applicant to others you know who have gone into health care?