

# Preceptor Development Session: Writing Letters of Recommendation

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Nicholas Demenagas, PharmD, BCIDP  
Michelle Pasciolla, PharmD, BCOP  
Dimitrios Savva, PharmD, BCPPS

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# Disclosure Statement

- The presenters have nothing to disclose.

# Learning Objectives

- Understand the preparation required to write a letter of recommendation
- Describe the essential components and evaluation criteria of a strong, effective letter of recommendation
- Differentiate between effective and ineffective letters of recommendation base on structure, content, and specificity

## Outline

- Preparing for writing a LOR
- Key criteria to be included – what makes a *good* letter
- Comparing *good* and *bad* LORs
- Group Discussion!

## **Disclaimer:**

This presentation reflects our personal experience reviewing letters of recommendation, as well as published literature and recommendations from ASHP. This does not reflect the NYPH residency or employment recruitment criteria.

Have you said no to writing a good LOR in the past?

- Yes
- No

Do you feel comfortable writing LORs?

- Yes
- No

Have you been asked to write a letter of recommendation?

- Yes
- No

## **Open Discussion:**

What was your process for writing a LOR?

What did you like/not like about writing a LOR?

How did you respond to a candidate asking for a LOR?

# Learning Assessment Question

- What is the very first step when you are asked to write an LOR?
  - a) Assess whether you are the most appropriate person to write this candidate's LOR
  - b) Without hesitation, agree to write their LOR
  - c) Ask the candidate for their residency list, CV and strengths/weaknesses
  - d) Start writing



## Where to begin...?

Don't start typing until you have answered several questions...

## Before you start typing...

- After someone approaches you to write a LOR, ask yourself if you would be the best person to comment on this person's work ethic and character.
- Be honest and politely decline, if necessary
  - If your experience with the candidate was not positive, encourage them to seek alternative letter writers
  - There is a difference between a LOR mentioning areas of improvement and a LOR with a negative tone and/or "red flags"

# How to say no (nicely)

Have a crucial conversation with the candidate

- If you have reservations about writing a letter:
  - Tell the candidate why you cannot provide a positive letter and what you can comment on
  - Help the candidate identify an alternative letter writer
  - If there is time – provide ways to improve and monitor progress before writing a letter
- Writing a reference with reservations WITHOUT informing the candidate is unfair and detrimental to the candidate's success

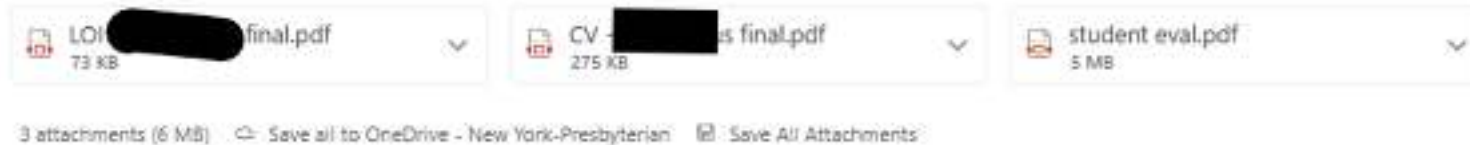
Crucial conversations are necessary and neglecting this reflects poorly on the candidate and the letter writer

# Preparation is Key!

- Request a CV, LOI, previously completed evaluations, shared deliverables/projects to guide your letter writing process
- Confirm what program/company/position they are applying for and if any specific attributes should be commented upon
  - Consider asking specific reasons for why said places (case by case)
- Ask what their career goals are (if not in LOI)
- Ask for deadlines / clarify timelines!

The more you know about the candidate, the better the LOR!

## Example



Hey Michelle,

Thank you so much for agreeing to write me a letter of recommendation. I truly appreciate your time! I was getting my LOI and CV ready and just finished finalizing them. Everything is attached below. I am applying to multiple programs so I will let you know whenever I apply to a new program. Currently, I only applied to the Rutgers Pharmaceutical Industry Fellowship (RPIF) which has multiple partner companies but the LOR will be sent to all the companies through that portal so it doesn't need to address any specific companies. I will add your information in the portal today and I believe you will receive a link to upload. They strongly recommend having the LORs by 11/2 before final rounds of interview but the final deadline is 11/10. I would really appreciate if you can kindly highlight some of these qualities in the letter:

- ability to work independently
- ability to evaluate primary literature
- presentation skills
- my eagerness to learn

Let me know if you have any feedback for me, please. Thank you so much for your continuous support throughout my rotation and this process.

Sincerely,

# When writing multiple LORs

- Make them unique to each candidate
- Do NOT repeat the same content
- Applicants apply to similar programs – it is *very* noticeable when a letter writer repeats themselves

## Learning Assessment Question

- Your APPE student requests you to write them a LOR for their PGY1 applications. The student's performance on rotation has been below average and you have concerns about recommending them. Which of the following is the best response?
  - a) Don't discuss these concerns with the learner and write them a letter, not recommending them for residency
  - b) Write them a letter, recommending them for residency because you want to see them succeed
  - c) Discuss your concerns with the candidate and inform them what you can write in your LOR AND ask them if they still want you to write them a letter
  - d) Don't discuss these concerns with the learner and write a "read between the lines" letter

STAY  
AMAZING

— New York —  
— Presbyterian —

## Components of an LOR

# LOR vs Likert Scale vs Both

- Many online portals/companies will use some type of Likert to assess various skills
- These portals may or may not allow for additional commentary
- If commentary allowed, a separate LOR is likely not necessary
- If commentary not allowed, a separate LOR could be extremely helpful

# LOR Components

## ▪ INTRODUCE YOURSELF TO THE READER

- What is your title, how long have you been in that position (or similar positions prior)
- If this is for a residency program or fellowship, describe how many learners you have precepted.

“Top 1% student” VS. “Top 1% student in the past 15 years of precepting”

# LOR Components

- DESCRIBE THE NATURE OF YOUR INTERACTIONS WITH THE CANDIDATE
  - How long have you known/worked with them?
  - How often did you work directly together?
  - What environment did you work together?
  
- Provides key context for the conditions the candidate was operating under AND helps establish the ways in which you can assess the candidate

# LOR Components

- Speak to the candidate's strengths AND areas for improvement
- Be specific – not just what they did, but HOW they did it
- Don't just focus on clinical skills, but also soft skills (communication, time management, conflict resolution, etc.)
- Continue to be honest!
  - Do not be afraid to comment upon areas of improvement. These are APPRECIATED by readers/future employers

# Standout Words

**Table 1.** Examples of Descriptive Words<sup>a</sup>

Word category	Examples
Grindstone words	Hardworking, conscientious, dependable, meticulous, thorough, diligent, dedicated, careful, reliable, effort, assiduous, trustworthy, responsible, methodical, industrious, busy, work, persistent, organized, disciplined
Empathy references	Empathetic, compassionate, sympathetic, kind, relate, engage, understand, approach, support, nice, gentle
Standout words	Excellent, superb, outstanding, unique, exceptional, unparalleled, most, wonderful, terrific, fabulous, magnificent, remarkable, extraordinary, amazing, supreme, unmatched, top
Teaching references	Teach, instruct, educate, train, mentor, supervise, advise, lecture, present
Illustrative phrases	Example, such, illustrate, like, instance

<sup>a</sup>Adapted, with permission, from reference 3.

# LOR Components

- Be thoughtful if/when including "Top" candidate verbiage
  - For example: "Best student I've ever had" but you have only precepted 2 students vs. "Top 10 student I've ever had" but you have been precepting for 10+ years.
- Spell check and proper grammar and punctuation are critical

A screenshot of a document with a highlighted sentence: "He was able to complete tasks when naked and...". The text is partially obscured by a red highlight box. The surrounding text is blurred, but some words like "demonstrated appropriate independence and resource", "electronic medical record for the patients. When", and "tion he was comfortable and able to reach out to n" are visible.

# LOR Components

- Overall Recommendation
  - Ensure the final recommendation is supported by the content of the LOR and/or the scaling
  - If the application does not have the option to select a specific recommendation (e.g., highly recommend, do not recommend), ensure your level of recommendation for the candidate is clear in the written content
- Pharmacy is a small world – be prepared to get phone calls/texts/emails about candidates if further clarification is needed

# Learning Assessment Question

- Which of the following are NOT best practices when writing a LOR?
  - a) Introduce yourself to the reader and establish your working relationship
  - b) Give specific examples to support your recommendations
  - c) Add a lot of filler and fluff to make the candidate “look good”
  - d) Be thoughtful when utilizing verbiage such as: “top student”



# LOR Examples

# Provide Background

Describe the circumstances when you interacted with the candidate. For example, was it during a holiday season, national health crisis, staff/faculty/preceptor shortage, or "business as usual"?

I was [REDACTED] APPE preceptor for [REDACTED] rotation under a busy workload

How often did you directly observe the candidate's clinical activities? Enter 'N/A' if you were did not work with the candidate in a clinical setting.

I observed most of the clinical activities that [REDACTED] participated in during my rotation - [REDACTED] also attended many meetings and presentations with me. [REDACTED] provided clinical in-services to the team, when appropriate.

How much independence was the candidate was given? Was it reduced or increased over the duration of your interactions with the candidate?

[REDACTED] was provided limited independence in the beginning of the rotation, but was permitted more independence during the course of the rotation when I saw [REDACTED] level of attention to detail. [REDACTED] is independent and does not frequently have to seek preceptor guidance when [REDACTED] does not know the answer to various scenarios.

How did the candidate's performance compare to other candidates?

[REDACTED] is the best student I have ever precepted. [REDACTED] was operating better than some PGY1 residents early in [REDACTED] student APPE rotation.

## REFERENCE RATINGS

	Not Observed	Consistently fails to meet expectations (1)	Room for improvement (2)	Meets expectations (3)	Occasionally exceeds expectations (4)	Consistently exceeds expectations (5)
Oral communication						✓
	<p>           [REDACTED] has excellent communication skills and is a joy to be around. [REDACTED] particularly shines when delivering patient presentations. [REDACTED] is thoughtful, knowledgeable, composed and well-spoken. One example was when [REDACTED] had presented a case presentation on a patient with a complex immunosuppression regimen. Her style was professional and [REDACTED] was able to appropriately simplify this for [REDACTED] audience base (primarily students and other members of the healthcare team). I consider [REDACTED] oral communication skills and presentation style to be at the level of a PGY1 resident.         </p>					
Leadership/Mentoring skills						✓
	<p>           This characteristic was difficult to assess with [REDACTED] this clinical rotation without a leadership/mentoring component. However, [REDACTED] attitude is definitely one of a natural leader. I am excited to see all that [REDACTED] accomplishes in the field of clinical pharmacy. [REDACTED] also was an excellent teacher to the medical students on our rotation and they worked collaboratively together.         </p>					
Assertiveness						✓
	<p>           [REDACTED] is appropriately assertive when working with other healthcare professionals. Surrounded by numerous experts in the [REDACTED] field, [REDACTED] was able to appropriately insert herself into our discussions without overstepping any bounds, or without being too quiet. [REDACTED] appropriately manages this attribute well, and I have no concerns that she will continue to learn to assert [REDACTED] as [REDACTED] becomes more knowledgeable within the realm of clinical pharmacy.         </p>					

REFERENCE RATINGS								
	Not Observed	Consistently fails to meet expectations (1)	Room for improvement (2)	Meets expectations (3)	Occasionally exceeds expectations (4)	Consistently exceeds expectations (5)		
Writing						✓	How often did you directly observe the candidate's clinical activities? Enter 'N/A' if you were did not work with the candidate in a clinical setting.	40 hours per week, 6 weeks rotation
Oral communication						✓	How much independence was the candidate was given? Was it reduced or increased over the duration of your interactions with the candidate?	By the end of the rotation, [REDACTED] was able to independently conduct medication therapy management and make informed decisions during patient consultations, requiring minimal supervision. [REDACTED] ability to handle complex cases without assistance demonstrated significant progress in [REDACTED] independence.
Leadership/Mentoring skills						✓	How did the candidate's performance compare to other candidates?	This student demonstrated exceptional critical thinking and communication skills. Compared to other candidates, [REDACTED] showed a higher level of autonomy and a proactive approach to problem-solving.
Assertiveness						✓	Enter two of this candidate's strengths and describe how you believe these strengths will be beneficial to the candidate's success in a residency program. Please reference characteristics you rated as "Consistently Exceeds Expectations" in the previous section.	One of [REDACTED]'s key strengths is his strong critical thinking and clinical judgment. [REDACTED] consistently demonstrated the ability to assess patient cases thoroughly and analyze complex medical histories. Another strength of this candidate is his excellent communication skills, both with patients and healthcare teams. [REDACTED] was able to clearly explain medication regimens to patients and effectively collaborate with interdisciplinary teams to ensure optimal care. The candidate's ability to convey complex information clearly and work well in a team will be invaluable in ensuring quality patient care and successful teamwork in a residency setting.
Organization and time management						✓	Enter two areas of improvement for this candidate and describe how you believe a residency program will improve these areas. Please reference characteristics you rated as "Room for Improvement" in the previous section.	The candidate demonstrated a strong work ethic but occasionally struggled with time management, especially when juggling multiple tasks during busy shifts. At times, this affected their ability to prioritize tasks effectively and complete all responsibilities on time. [REDACTED]
Ability to prioritize and meet deadlines						✓		
Ability to work in a team (e.g., rounding, teamwork)						✓		
Problem-solving						✓		
Effective patient interaction						✓		
Dependability						✓		
Independence and resourcefulness						✓		
Ability to accept constructive criticism						✓		
Emotional stability and maturity						✓		
Professionalism						✓		
Clinical Skills						✓		
Motivation						✓		
Resourcefulness						✓		
RECOMMENDATION CONCERNING ADMISSION								
I highly recommend this candidate								

	Not Observed	Consistently fails to meet expectations (1)	Room for improvement (2)	Meets expectations (3)	Occasionally exceeds expectations (4)	Consistently exceeds expectations (5)
Organization and time management				✓		
	<p>_____ seemed largely well-organized for rotation and was able to consistently complete the daily activities that were explicitly assigned to _____ rotation; feedback was shared with _____ regarding time management of longitudinal activities (ie. final presentation)</p>					
Ability to prioritize and meet deadlines				✓		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feedback was provided to _____ regarding time management / deadline prioritization - approximately 2 weeks of rotation time were granted to work on final presentation (journal club), though the initial draft was provided to preceptor 2 days before final presentation date which limited the amount of feedback that was able to be implemented.</li> </ul>					
Ability to work in a team (e.g., rounding, teamwork)				✓		
Problem solving				✓		
Effective patient interaction			✓			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unable to comment - _____ did not have direct patient interactions on the antimicrobial stewardship rotation, though did successfully pass _____ initial patient education competency that is administered to all students serving on an acute care rotation at my institution</li> </ul>					
Dependability				✓		
Independence and resourcefulness				✓		
Ability to accept constructive criticism					✓	
Emotional stability and maturity					✓	
Professionalism						✓
Clinical Skills				✓		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>_____ demonstrated a decent recall of didactic pharmaceutical knowledge and is largely able to state relevant drug information when prompted (ie. can recall nephrotoxicity AE for vancomycin), though has room for improvement on the clinical application of such knowledge (ie. required prompting to identify AKI via</li> </ul>					

	Not Observed	Consistently fails to meet expectations (1)	Room for improvement (2)	Meets expectations (3)	Occasionally exceeds expectations (4)	Consistently exceeds expectations (5)
Motivation				✓		
Resourcefulness				✓		
<b>RECOMMENDATION CONCERNING ADMISSION</b>						
I recommend this candidate with some reservations						

• I believe [redacted] could be more proactive in [redacted] self-driven learning and seek out additional educational opportunities. [redacted] was generally assigned ~3 mandatory new patients to work up daily (+1-2 old patients to follow up recs) and actively encouraged to pick up additional patients prior to afternoon discussion. While [redacted] always had worked up the patients explicitly assigned to [redacted] did not challenge [redacted] to look at any additional cases despite having perceived time to do so (between 8am - 1pm) over the course of our time together.

REFERENCE RATINGS

	Not Observed	Consistently fails to meet expectations (1)	Room for improvement (2)	Meets expectations (3)	Occasionally exceeds expectations (4)	Consistently exceeds expectations (5)
Writing						✓
Oral communication						✓
Leadership/Mentoring skills					✓	
Assertiveness						✓
Organization and time management						✓
Ability to prioritize and meet deadlines						✓
Ability to work in a team (e.g., rounding, teamwork)						✓
	<p>_____ was always someone that people wanted on their team. They could count on her and she would work great with others and not afraid to address those that didn't put in the time or work to have the team succeed.</p>					
Problem-solving						✓
Effective patient interaction						✓
Dependability						✓
Independence and resourcefulness						✓
Ability to accept constructive criticism						✓
Emotional stability and maturity						✓
Professionalism						✓
	<p>_____ was always very professional, prepared for every class, lecture, recitation. Always address everyone properly &amp; led by example.</p>					
Clinical Skills						✓
	<p>• Has very intuitive clinical skills &amp; can apply knowledge to situations. Very capable of thinking outside the box.</p>					
Motivation						✓
Resourcefulness						✓

RECOMMENDATION CONCERNING ADMISSION

I highly recommend this candidate

Where did your interaction with the candidate occur? Scroll down for more dropdown options.

Classroom

If you selected Other, describe where you interacted with the candidate.

-

If you were the candidate's preceptor, how many learners do you precept a year (on average)? Scroll down for more dropdown options. Select 'N/A' if you were not the candidate's preceptor.

N/A

How many months did you interact with the candidate?

36 months for various classes

What was the relative time of your interactions with the candidate (per week, in hours)?

4 h

When in the candidate's training cycle did you precept the candidate? (e.g., First Rotation Block, End of Training Year) Enter 'N/A' if you were not the candidate's preceptor.

na

If you were the candidate's employer or supervisor, in what setting did you manage the candidate? (e.g., Community Pharmacy, Hospital Pharmacy, Other) Enter 'N/A' if you were not the candidate's preceptor.

na

Describe the circumstances when you interacted with the candidate. For example, was it during a holiday season, national health crisis, staff/faculty/preceptor shortage, or 'business as usual'?

\_\_\_\_\_ has been my student since her 1st professional year on average we spend at the minimum 4 hours per week but some semester was 6 hours per week.

# Why does this all matter?

Your letter of reference can make or break the candidate "overall score"

Letter 1:

Independence and resourcefulness	✓	_____ is a self-directed learner and takes ownership of her work. _____ demonstrated innovation during the DI rotation by reorganizing calendar invites on _____ work schedule to avoid meeting conflicts.
Ability to accept constructive criticism	✓	_____ contacted me back in September asking my opinion on creating an ASHP MCM poster from the MUE that she conducted during the DI rotation. It was a great idea! During the months that followed, _____ me drafts and I responded with many edits. _____ took this constructive criticism very well and produced a final poster that made both of us feel proud!
Emotional stability and maturity	✓	_____ is very mature and behaved professionally at all times. _____ is respectful, compassionate, and eager to please.
Professionalism	✓	_____ is professional at all times, in her dress and demeanor. _____ behaves ethically and compassionately, focuses on work. _____ is interested in advocacy for the profession and even as a student, strives to be an active member in professional organizations.

	Not Observed	Consistently fails to meet expectations (1)	Needs for improvement (2)	Meets expectations (3)	Unusually exceeds expectations (4)	Consistently exceeds expectations (5)
Writing						✓
						_____ is a very good writer. This was apparent from _____ physician newsletter article. The article was structured with a good introductory paragraph followed by data results. Significant findings were highlighted which led to a conclusion/action plan. The article was free of grammar and spelling errors. _____ final submissions of her drug and class reviews, journal club handout, and medication use evaluation were also of high quality, but it's the newsletter article that starts on a blank page without a template.
Oral communication						✓
						Oh my gosh, everyone in the pharmacy loves _____ quickly established rapport with me and everyone _____ interacted with. _____ did an excellent job with oral presentations at the PST Committee meeting and Journal Club. After the PST meeting, the oncology clinical pharmacist asked _____ to apply for our residency program. After _____ journal club, _____ antimicrobial stewardship pharmacist asked _____ to come back and be our _____ infectious disease pharmacist! Besides _____ lovely personality and willingness to help, _____ main attraction is the high quality of work she submits.
Leadership/Mentoring skills						✓
						_____ demonstrates the maturity and ambition that is typically seen in a leader. _____ has short and long-term career plans that include completing a residency with hopes of pursuing a PGY2 in _____. Even during _____ first APPE rotation, _____ was planning to present a poster in December at a national pharmacy meeting.
Assertiveness						✓
						_____ quickly acclimates to her surroundings and is adept at developing professional relationships. _____ takes ownership of _____ projects and produces high quality work.
Organization and time management						✓
						_____ was always here on time and ready to work. _____ has good time management skills and is very dependable. _____ functions as an effective team member. _____ has a strong work ethic.
Ability to prioritize and meet deadlines						✓
						_____ was basically done with all of her assignments a week early. She can easily manage a workload that may be too much for others. _____ is good at getting into the zone, focusing, and cranking out top-level work.
Ability to work in a team (e.g., rounding, teamwork)						✓
						_____ definitely conducts herself as a team member. _____ respects the roles and responsibilities of different caregivers and demonstrated a willingness to consider perspectives from other healthcare members.

# Why does this all matter?

Your letter of reference can make or break the candidate "overall score"

Letter 2:

REFERENCE RATINGS						
	Not Observed	Consistently fails to meet expectations (1)	Room for improvement (2)	Meets expectations (3)	Occasionally exceeds expectations (4)	Consistently exceeds expectations (5)
Writing					✓	
Oral communication						✓
Leadership/Mentoring skills					✓	
Assertiveness					✓	
Organization and time management						✓
Ability to prioritize and meet deadlines					✓	
Ability to work in a team (e.g., rounding, teamwork)					✓	
Problem solving				✓		
Effective patient interaction					✓	
Dependability					✓	
Independence and resourcefulness				✓		
Ability to accept constructive criticism						✓
Emotional stability and maturity						✓
	Not Observed	Consistently fails to meet expectations (1)	Room for improvement (2)	Meets expectations (3)	Occasionally exceeds expectations (4)	Consistently exceeds expectations (5)
Professionalism						✓
Clinical Skills				✓		
Motivation						✓
Resourcefulness					✓	
RECOMMENDATION CONCERNING ADMISSION						
I highly recommend this candidate						

## Key Points to Consider

- Be honest with the candidate about what you CAN and CAN'T write
- Preparation is key – have all of the tools and resources prior to starting
- Be thorough in your evaluation – cover all key components and provide specific examples
- If you're writing multiple letters, make them unique
- When you're done, proofread!

# Resources

- Guide to Serving as a Reference: Supporting Residency and Job Candidates. ASHP New Practitioners Forum. Updated August 2025.
- Tips for writing a letter of recommendation as a new practitioner pharmacist. *AJHP*. 80(5): 20 Oct 2022.



# Preceptor Development Session: Writing Letters of Recommendation

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Nicholas Demenagas, PharmD, BCIDP ([nid9104@nyp.org](mailto:nid9104@nyp.org))  
Michelle Pasciolla, PharmD, BCOP ([msp9008@nyp.org](mailto:msp9008@nyp.org))  
Dimitrios Savva, PharmD, BCPPS ([dis9082@nyp.org](mailto:dis9082@nyp.org))

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