



Composing a Letter of Evaluation that Captures The Applicant as an Individual

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One of the most daunting challenges to premedical advisors is writing the letter of evaluation for medical school applicants from their institutions. Letters provide information used by medical school admissions committees for both screening and selection decisions. In fact, medical school admissions officers responded overwhelmingly positively to a national survey gauging the importance of the advisors' letters, stressing that the premedical letter has influence on, and contributes to the committee assessment of candidates for admission.¹

In reading the letters written by advisors regarding the suitability of applicants for medical school, medical school admissions committee members are looking for useful, candid, and honest information that will allow them to make better selection decisions.² However, letters from some institutions are routinely categorized as being not very helpful in the admissions process.³ Letters of evaluation described as least helpful by admissions committee members at six medical schools across the southeastern United States had one or more of the following characteristics: a repetition of information from the application, unsubstantiated superlatives or vague generalities, description of a grade in one particular class (an indication that the letter writer had a limited relationship with the applicant), or inclusion of irrelevant information regarding such issues as the applicant's family connections or the applicant's religious beliefs.³

Klein (1995) concluded that both advisors and admissions committee members could be left feeling either satisfied or dissatisfied with both the effort it takes to write letters and final product itself.⁴ We believe that, most of the time, letters are helpful, leaving both the writer and the reader satisfied with the information provided. In those cases, the letters of evaluation contain important and unique information to help admissions committees know more about the personal characteristics, interpersonal qualities, classroom abilities, and

exposure to medicine of applicants.¹ Such informative letters help establish good working relationships between the premedical advisor and the medical school admissions committee, by building a sense of trust in their content and communication.

We contend that there is an art to writing letters of evaluation, and that some of the best approaches to letter writing can be learned. In this paper we will address two aspects of letter writing, obtaining the necessary information and crafting the language of the letter.

Getting to Know the Students

Where do advisors obtain information they use to write knowledgeable letters about their students' academic abilities, personality characteristics, relevant experiences, and overall suitability for a medical career? How do they come to know their students as unique individuals with unique qualities and circumstances? Ultimately, it is the applicant's responsibility to provide information about herself or himself to both faculty and the premedical advisor. However, settings for interactions are many. Most premedical advisors serve as academic counselors to premedical students. Premedical advisors holding faculty positions may teach aspiring medical students in their courses. Advisors with active research programs may employ students in their research laboratories. Some premedical advisors participate in study abroad programming and may come to know students in living and learning settings. Alternatively, premedical advisors may solicit comments from other faculty who know the applicant better.

Advisors may also learn about their students through review of data related to their academic performances. To understand the student's academic abilities, the advisor carefully examines the student's academic record in college, including course work taken and grades earned. In preparing to describe the applicant's academic aptitude and scholarship, it is helpful for the advisor to have knowledge of the student's classroom behaviors including work ethic, preparation, and attendance.^{1,3} Advisors usually have access to the student's performance on the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT). Some advisors even have access to the student's performance on college entrance examinations, such as the ACT or SAT. Through review of standardized scores prior to admission to the undergraduate program, grade point averages attained in college, and MCAT scores, advisors can determine whether the student's undergraduate performance is in keeping with his or her abilities as measured by standardized tests. Should student performance in the classroom fall short of the expected aptitude, advisors can often clarify unique circumstances or hardships faced that may have influenced the applicant's classroom performance in the letters they write.

Writing the Letter

Premedical advisors may work with applicants on their own, or with other faculty who comprise an advisory committee. The advisory committee members may come together to interview aspiring applicants to learn more about their accomplishments and personal qualities prior to contributing to the letter of evaluation. Within the premedical committee, individual faculty may each be asked to draft a separate letter on behalf of selected students. When the premedical advisor sits down to write the letter of evaluation on an individual applicant, he or she draws information from the previously outlined interactions and sources. The premedical advisor may be asked to draft a singular letter, representing the committee, or make summary comments, interpreting and synthesizing the separate letters written by individual faculty members. Medical school admissions committee members usually report that it is also helpful for the advisor to rank the applicant in categories and compare the student to past successful applicants.

Regardless of the authorship of the letter of evaluation, there are necessary topics that are deemed helpful by admissions committee members. Topics that should be incorporated in the letters include information addressing the personal characteristics (e.g., integrity, honesty, reliability, professionalism, determination, leadership, and motivation) and social skills (e.g., interpersonal and communication skills, ability to interact in groups and establish peer relationships, empathy, and altruism) of the applicant.³ Importantly, most admissions officers and admissions committee members value both positive and negative information on applicants as this combination typically gives them a realistic perspective of the applicant's strengths and weaknesses.⁵

Crafting the Language: Addressing Personal Characteristics and Social Skills

In thinking about the letter writing, it may be helpful to consider tips dispensed in composition classes that are aimed at assisting students in writing good narration and description. To demonstrate logical thinking in composition, students are taught to approach their subject matter objectively, analyzing the varied points of view, and working to convey insight and understanding.⁶ The same considerations apply in crafting the letter of evaluation. Information that faculty obtain by knowing, teaching, advising, and working with the applicant is more helpful than providing lists of the applicant's grades or activities that are readily available from the application materials. The analysis, insight, and understanding that advisors can supply in the letters that describe *who the applicant is as a person* receive great consideration by admissions committee members.

Some authors of letters of evaluation have stated that they are unsure of the types of information about the personalities of their students that should be included in the narrative. They have expressed difficulty in describing and interpreting student behaviors and attitudes. Because medical school admission committee members consider both positive and negative aspects of key personal qualities, social skills, and relevant experiences and abilities when selecting students who are suitable for entrance into the medical school, it is important to incorporate such information in the letters of evaluation.

Examples of narrative comments extracted from letters of evaluation that describe the strengths and weaknesses of applicants are provided as follows. While we offer these passages as descriptive samples of qualities of individual students, we do not presume or desire that these statements should be incorporated into others' letters verbatim. Rather, they serve as models of language that could be imitated in crafting the descriptive passages related to personal qualities of individual students. Samples of statements describing leadership, ability to work collaboratively, honesty and integrity, responsibility and dedication, motivation, empathy, communication skills, service to others, problem solving ability, exposure to the profession, and common sense and judgement are provided. General definitions of strengths and weaknesses regarding each quality are given, and passages are categorized accordingly. Note that statements may be appropriate for more than one category. Some of the statements are derived from summaries of faculty evaluations constructed by the premedical advisor; others are from individual professors. All have been modified to protect the identity of students and their institutions.

Leadership

Strengths (ability to direct, organize, and/or take charge):

“Leads by example and organizational skills, not by an assertive presence”.

“Vanessa knows exactly when to lead and when to let go; when to speak and when to listen; when to assume control and when to delegate authority. She negotiates this delicate balance between leading and listening better than almost any other student I have seen.”

“Melissa has excellent leadership ability. She has the ideas and the ability to convince others to act on them. She inspires respect and trust. She works well with others and is not abrasive or arrogant.”

“This year John was given a difficult task of being the Resident Assistant for both upper class women and freshmen men. He did an exceptional job. He was very compassionate to residents on his hall who had severe physical and emotional difficulties. He provided creative educational and social programming for the residents and truly went above and beyond the call of duty. He maintains his calm under pressure and responds appropriately to crisis situations.”

Weaknesses (concerns about passivity):

“Marianne is definitely a good follower. She does not have the assertiveness, the strength of character, or ego to be an effective leader. She fits smoothly into groups, quietly going about the business of doing what is requested from her.”

“Patricia can work well on a team, but I do not see her as a leader-she isn’t very aggressive and does not like to tell people what to do.”

“Peter will have more problems with interpersonal matters because he tends to be on the quiet side. He interacts with a lot of people, but he does not seem to contribute as much.”

“My impression is that Ellen, although not really a loner, is nevertheless comfortable working alone. She could work in a team, but I do not think she would seek its leadership.”

Ability To Work Collaboratively

Strengths (skill in bringing others together in a constructive manner):

“Stephanie works well with others. She is an outstanding and dedicated leader, or a cooperative group member. She has shown a real willingness to reach out and get involved in a variety of different settings and with all different kinds of people.”

“I owe him something of a debt. He was one of those rare students who function as catalysts for the entire class. His intellectual curiosity and willingness to participate set the tone for a whole term of "Introduction to Humanities" and made my life as a teacher much easier.”

“While performing well in my classes was important to him, he seemed equally dedicated to understanding the science beyond what was going to be on the exam. His presence in class was refreshing because he was always willing to answer difficult questions even if he looked foolish. He was very generous with his time when it came to assisting other students who were having difficulty with the material. There is usually a good atmosphere in the class when the top student is not competitive.”

“I look forward to Mike’s contributions to our group meetings. He takes the discussions very seriously. He listens first and then speaks only when he has something meaningful to contribute. As a result, his peers hang on every word and really seem to value his opinion.”

Weaknesses (concerns about social skills and/or control within a group):

“He seems not to be part of any group. He is able to reach decisions and take actions independent of others.”

“While Susie is active in a couple of organizations on campus, she normally goes her own way and does what she considers to be of interest to her and of importance to her.”

“He takes great pride in fastidious techniques that nearly always produce accurate and precise results. He works very well with other bright students. When paired with students less capable than he, though, he tends to dominate the group a bit.”

“Theresa has an abundance of self-confidence. Although this confidence is merited by her abilities, she has yet to master the skill of communicating her level of proficiency without alienating her colleagues.”

Honesty and Integrity

Strengths (high moral standards and values):

“She is an especially conscientious, and honest person. These qualities are so basic to her personality that she inspires an unusual amount of trust from others. Her integrity and honesty are of the highest order.”

“Unlike some students who participate in activities simply to broaden their resumes or to earn praise, Mike does everything with a purpose and the intention of making a difference with no desire for recognition.”

“As an RA in a freshman hall, Nick dealt with several delicate situations professionally, and with an easy, natural manner. He was able to enforce all college policies and regulations without alienating his peers and earned their respect and friendship in the process.”

“As a captain of the baseball team, he had to make decisions that pitted him between the coaches and his teammates. He was willing to make a decision that he believed was right, even though his teammates did not agree.”

Weaknesses (concerns about morality, deception, or reputation):

“You will notice from John’s transcript that he received an “F” grade in Organic Chemistry during the Spring of his sophomore year. This was the result of an unfortunate incident involving the university Honor Code. John has assured me that he will address the details surrounding this incident in his personal statement on the AMCAS application.”

“My concern regarding Ian’s integrity relates to a situation where he had the opportunity to take leadership and stem some poor attitudes that were being detrimental to our soccer team. Rather, he allowed them to continue and, in my opinion, silently encouraged them to continue. This situation illustrates my concern for Ian and is an area where he needs to mature.”

Responsibility and Dedication

Strengths (ability to be accountable and complete commitments as expected):

“Matt is obviously disciplined, perseverant, and thorough in his work. He is a very admirable student and one I could easily regard as a professional colleague.”

“Catherine is an extremely hard worker, is self-motivated, and self-reliant. She is aware of her duties and completes them. In terms of her perseverance and application, she is absolutely first rate.”

“He completes what he starts and works until he is done. He applies himself to the task at hand with a minimum of fuss. He has excellent work habits and self discipline.”

“Alan has been a paramedic for five years and carries this responsibility when he is not on the job. He keeps surgical gloves and a breathing aid in his backpack just in case his expertise is needed. He has impressed me with his stories of dealing with life-threatening situations as well as dealing personally with patients and their families. Alan has a very cool, calm disposition that will allow him to interact positively with his patients and colleagues.”

Weaknesses (concerns about priority setting, purposefulness):

“One must point out that his academic performance may reflect the added effort expended on organizing his rock band and performing at many social activities on campus; perhaps a sign of misplaced priorities.”

“Mary’s undergraduate performance reflects the undirected efforts of a potentially bright student. Since she has dedicated her efforts towards medical school, her grades have been more reflective of her ability.”

“He is committed to medical school, but he gets so involved in so many things as to be distracted from the main mission. His energies have not always been directed towards academic matters. He is capable of much better grades and it seems likely that, away from the distractions of undergraduate life, he will demonstrate this.”

“His decision to not engage me in a more formal conversation about his medical school application process is indicative of the too laid-back approach he has taken to his academic pursuits. He is a nice, pleasant individual with a great deal of academic potential who just does not rise to the high standards that he is capable of pursuing.”

Motivation

Strengths (ability to direct focus, manage time):

“Jane is extremely well adjusted and highly motivated. She maintains a positive outlook regardless of any situation. She is resilient and self-assured while still acknowledging how much she has to learn.”

“She has the ability to make tough decisions when it is necessary. She knows what has to be done to reach her goals and she is willing to back these decisions with work. Carey is highly motivated and takes responsibility for her own learning but seeks advice comfortably.”

“Since she is a single mother who puts in many hours a week working to support herself and her daughter, she is clearly juggling much more than the traditional student. The hardships she has overcome and the experiences she has had make her much more qualified for medicine than many students. I can only say that her achievements in the face of such opposition humble me.”

“I have recognized in Jason a constant search for a challenge. His high GPA is evidence of the way he approaches his academics. His grades are all the more remarkable when considering his extra-curricular activities. Jason is on three varsity sports teams, he is a beautiful glass blower and accomplished ceramicist.”

Weaknesses (lack of drive, questions regarding internal or external locus of control):

“I feel that Mr. Carter is not strongly motivated. Whatever the reason, his performance has definitely been lackluster. If he could take additional science courses and show improvement, no doubt I could raise my level of enthusiasm for him.”

“He has been planning on going to medical school since I have known him, but he has not been able to clearly explain why whenever I have asked him about it. He certainly has the intellectual ability to do well, just not a lot of passion.”

“Bill seemed to me to be an underachiever. He did tremendously well on the MCAT, but I do not know him well enough to say that his performance on standardized tests will translate into success in medical school. My major reservation is Bill’s lack of a strong work ethic. Perhaps he will mature rapidly in medical school in this regard.”

“Although Will’s GPA of 3.5 is solid, his performance in my class, in which he earned a B, was not as strong as our premed students that I recommend with greater enthusiasm. I am not aware of his involvement in extracurricular activities that might have placed a time constraint on him. The other reason that I do not recommend Will more enthusiastically is that I do not see the leadership potential or the level of maturity that I expect of premeds at his stage. Will often seems to be negative in his outlook. I have heard several times from colleagues that Will questions his instructors on missed exam questions, as if the instructor is at fault for his mistake.”

Empathy

Strengths (ability to understand others’ feelings or ideas):

“Mary has participated in a wide variety of campus activities but, for her, the most important has been her involvement with the Magdalene House, a half-way house for former prostitutes and substance abusers. She especially enjoys being a role model for these women and helping them to recover their self respect.”

“As hard as he worked for himself, he had a genuine concern for other students and tried to assist them whenever possible. I found his insights on the problems many students were having in my class to be very valuable for my efforts to improve my teaching.”

“Larry served as one of the student coordinators for four major campus blood drives. His initiative in preparation for the events was impressive. He and her partner handled every detail of the event. They recruited donors as well as volunteers to staff the drive. They also managed the publicity as well as the communication with the blood center staff. Even more impressive that the work leading up to the drive was the way Larry conducted himself during the event. Any moment not in class was spent at the drive making sure everything ran smoothly. With his easy manner, Larry managed to put donors at ease.”

“Jane really separates herself from the typical pre-med student in her personal characteristics. She has a quiet confidence that serves her well. She is a very good listener and sets people at ease. I admire her for her involvement as a rape-crisis volunteer. She seems ideally suited for this service because of her even temper and sympathetic nature. You cannot talk to Jane for any period of time without knowing she listened and understood your point of view. Her interest in medicine comes from a journey of self-discovery and introspection.”

***Weaknesses** (Lack of insight or care into the feelings of others):*

“She’ll be at the top of her class in medical school, and somewhere along the way in the next 4-8 years, her hard-driving, sometimes tactless, approach to interacting with people will be tempered with appropriate restraint and empathy.”

Communication Skills

***Strengths** (ability to interact interpersonally):*

“She is an outgoing person. She is at ease with her peers or elders and has no difficulty in communicating. She is never at a loss for words and always seems to be at ease.”

“Paul is very articulate, poised and able to adjust his style and methods of presentation to both his audience and for the specific purpose of the communication.”

“Billy is a very effective communicator. He speaks with clarity, maturity, and decisiveness. He is a ‘straight shooter’ who has learned tact.”

“Brian’s outstanding intellectual skills are matched by his written and oral communication abilities. Brian is one of the finest technical writers I have ever encountered. He has a style that is engaging without sacrificing scientific accuracy. His paper on the Diels-Alder reaction was clearly the best in the organic chemistry class. Brian did far more research than anyone else and effectively conveyed the

mechanism and synthetic aspects of this reaction. His oral presentation was similarly excellent. Brian is a poised speaker with a thorough understanding of how to use visual aids and how to pitch his talk to the level of his audience.”

Weaknesses (*exhibits behaviors that distract from interpersonal relations: extreme shyness, inability to sustain conversation, poor eye contact*):

“He is quiet and not at all outgoing. He is not easy to talk with and usually does not say much”.

“He is rather self-centered, if not boastful. His behaviors may range from too much confidence to approval seeking.”

“He was a good student, but what struck me the most was his unwillingness (inability?) to speak up in class. I always had the impression that he did not want to be in class. Even in lab he was quiet, although his lab partner was quite friendly and outgoing.”

Service To Others

Strengths (*demonstration of altruistic behaviors toward others*):

“Mary has a long history of volunteer work dating back to junior high school. Her dedication to service has only increased during her college years. Although Mary has participated in a wide variety of campus activities, the most important to her has been tutoring three afternoons a week at an inner-city middle school. She has been tutoring for the past two years and will continue throughout her senior year.”

“She is a mover and a shaker and gets things done. Last year she was in charge of the Humane Society and conducted a dog/cat food drive on campus and also worked with their employees to bring animals to campus for several hours.”

“Being a cook at the Union Mission every Friday night and Saturday morning has been an important part of Bob’s college life. As far as I know, he has not missed this weekend activity for the past two academic years. He certainly is enthusiastic about this activity and looks forward to creating new recipes during his senior year.”

“Hospital volunteer work has been a big part of Michelle’s college career. She spends six hours a week reading stories to patients or helping children with homework assignments at the children’s hospital.”

Weaknesses (*lack of altruistic activity*):

“Bob has not been heavily involved in volunteer activities during the school year. Most of his out of class time has been involved with his fraternity, in which he holds an elected office, and intramural sports.”

“Working to complete and honors thesis in molecular biology has consumed the majority of Sam’s out of classroom time. Because of his strong dedication to his research project, he has not been as involved in volunteer service projects as most of our other premed students. I do not see this as a weakness but rather a reflection of his interest.”

“Mr. Smith seems to have a weakness in demonstrated service to others. Although he has done some volunteer work at a VA hospital in his hometown, he has created the impression that he did not know what medical school is all about.”

Problem Solving Ability

Strengths (ability to approach problems in calculated manner):

“She has outstanding intellectual ability and her analytical skills are superb. Although she has double majored in engineering and math, she has used elective time effectively to pursue humanity courses in the College of Arts and Science.”

“The thing I found most refreshing about Mary is that she took full responsibility for her initial shortcomings and took the appropriate steps to overcome them. We had the typical 'I bombed your first exam, but want to know how to improve' conversation. The difference between Mary and most students with which I have that conversation is that Mary took my advice to heart and made the appropriate adjustments in her study habits. She showed up regularly at my office hours and came prepared with questions. She also asked for additional problems to make sure she was ready for the exams. She demonstrated the kind of resolve she will need to succeed in medical school.”

“Not only did Dan answer the vast majority of questions on every exam correctly, he did so incredibly clearly and succinctly, as if he had mulled over the question for hours and drafted the best response possible.”

“Before the research started I thought that I would have to spend a lot of time in the lab with Matt to make sure he was doing things correctly. It quickly became evident that he was able to work independently and make excellent decisions about the direction of the research. By the end of the summer Matt was in complete control of the research and already formulating future projects.”

Weaknesses (muddled thinking):

“In looking over her academic record, I feel a bit insecure with her ability to handle the rigors of medical school. Judging from her performance in my class, she seems to be able to memorize but cannot apply knowledge to new problems when taken out of context.”

“As a first term sophomore, Anne enrolled in my Human Animal class and earned a C+. Although she did write a very good disease paper for the class, her overall exam performance was consistently in the 'C' range. Her final exam actually fell into the 'D' range. Of the 30 students enrolled in this particular section of the course, I know that at least 6 of them are currently in medical school. Of these six, two earned a B+, two earned an A- and two earned an A. Anne's C+ seems especially uncompetitive given this comparison.”

“Sarah's academic performance in her other upper level science classes has been mediocre. It appears that Sarah was well-prepared as a freshman, but has faltered somewhat in the more advanced classes.”

“Lisa was able to grasp general concepts, but she had difficulty seeing the connections between the concepts and solving problems using them. She always gave the impression that she understood everything, but she never backed it up on exams. She never took my advice for improving her grade.”

Exposure To The Profession

Strengths (knowledge of and experience in the medical profession):

“Together with his work as an emergency medical technician at the university emergency department, Steve has had outstanding exposure to the field of medicine, including extensive patient contact. Steve has drawn blood, performed CPR, applied slings and casts, and taken vitals – experiences well beyond those of our typical premed students. I rate his sincerity of interest in and knowledge of medicine as truly superior.”

“As far as knowledge of the medical field, Joe has more experience than almost every other applicant I have encountered in my 10 years here. He worked for a year as a unit secretary at the university hospital and then six months after that as an emergency medical technician. He also did a six-week internship in a stroke rehabilitation clinic. He earned his EMT license while carrying a full course-load and playing soccer. Clearly his time-management skills are exceptional. When I have heard Joe speak about his experiences as an EMT, I have noted that he has a firm understanding of many different aspects of the medical profession. His sense of compassion and empathy are very strong. He has enjoyed the challenge of being part of a medical team and I know he is looking forward to leading that team when he becomes a physician.”

“While he was in France, Tony fell ill (as most students in this age group do after their week-long break from class) and we took him to see a French physician. Tony spent his time in the office comparing the facilities, the doctor's approach, and procedures to those that he had seen in the United States. Despite his weakened state caused by an advanced sinus infection, he nevertheless found the strength to ask his physician numerous questions about the profession and then to analyze the cultural differences between the two countries and their methods.”

“I met Rob when he was a prospective student on his first visit to our institution. He was interested in medicine so I asked him why he wanted to become a physician. Most high school students give very poor answers to that question, mostly due to immaturity and a lack of real knowledge. Rob, however, gave the best answer I had ever heard from a high school student. He was able to articulate motivation to become a physician based on a combination of experiences as a lifeguard and the scientific research he had done at the university cancer center.”

Weaknesses (lack of insight into the lives and responsibilities of physicians and/or the health care system):

“Although both of her parents are physicians, she has not been involved in any activity to gain additional exposure to the field of medicine. She has worked in her parent's office during the summer months, mostly doing clerical work.”

“In our interview with him we found that he lacked the warmth that characterizes the majority of our applicants. He had some difficulty conveying to us his reasons for becoming a physician. This summer he will volunteer in a hospital which may give him greater insights to his goal as well as exposing him to a service role that he has lacked.”

“Her interview with us was poor because she could not articulate good answers, nor was she able to explain her motivation for becoming a physician. She must put herself in a position where she can discover her reasons for wanting to become a physician.”

“Although I think she could successfully complete medical school, I feel that Ann is taken by the glamour of becoming a doctor — I really doubt that she fully appreciates the amount of work and dedication it will take to get there.”

Common Sense And Judgment

Strengths (level-headed practicality in decision-making):

“Her good common sense and fine judgment are beyond expectations for some one at this stage of intellectual development. Exceptionally mature, quietly self-confident but strong and decisive.”

“Very practical and down to earth. She uses good judgment and has no problems making decisions.”

“I was tremendously impressed at how he handled the aftermath to his horrible injury. David never blamed the quality of health care that he received and maintained his poise and good humor throughout his long hospital stays. He never asked for special accommodations from his professors and never pitied himself.”

“He is the most sought-after chemistry laboratory assistant because of his patience, his responsible attitude, and his communication skills.”

Weaknesses (Lack of ability to make day-to-day decisions):

“Tim does not seem to be decisive; he occasionally needs reassurance.”

“Sarah seeks advice when she feels she needs it, and takes it into consideration when making decisions. She is a very practical young woman but is sometimes hesitant in making hard decisions.”

“Bob’s record shows that he has made some inappropriate social decisions. He could be one of our very best students, but right now he is underachieving.”

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