

Letters of Recommendation: Whom to Ask and How

Purpose of letters of recommendation

Letters of recommendation provide information and insight on personal qualities, such as professionalism and the academic record. Academic officers want to hear from established professionals who will speak to your intellectual and human potential. The admissions office needs letters to evaluate your candidacy fully. Your ability to secure a useful letter signifies your capacity to initiate, build, and sustain meaningful professional relationships, qualities that are essential to the effective practice of medicine.

Reference letters provide an objective, authoritative, and supportive external viewpoint on an applicant. They are called “recommendations” because they are expected to appreciate the candidate’s strengths. A truly candid letter may comment on low points, unfortunate experiences, adversity, and obstacles. The supportive letter writer will point out these imperfections in the context of the positive qualities the applicant exhibits. When a letter writer is candid, the letter gains credibility. No one is perfect and the consummate letter writer acknowledges this while substantively supporting the applicant with anecdotes to back up generalizations.

Letter writers should refer to the fit between the applicant’s strengths and a medical career. The practice of medicine requires professionals of good character who can work effectively under conditions of self-regulation, who have incorporated impeccable character standards, know how to take personal responsibility, and have a record of conducting absolutely confidential interpersonal communication.

You will need letters of recommendation for the HCEC if you elect to use their service. If you elect not to use the HCEC, medical schools will rely on the individual letters of recommendation you submit through AMCAS.

Whom to ask for a letter of recommendation

People who know you well and have shown that they care about you are the best candidates for recommenders. If in doubt about whom to ask, consult a health careers or faculty advisor. You can also get good information from on-campus briefings held during the academic year and posted on the Career Services website.

Letters matter greatly in admission decisions. If you cannot think of three people who fit the criteria to be excellent personal referees, it may be wise to consider taking a gap year wherein you can find mentors and cultivate strong, supportive professional relationships.

Which set of referees can help you build a balanced profile of your credentials and relevant experiences? One person will not be able to discuss all of your qualities. Taken together, your three letters can cover many aspects. Good sources of letters generally include a faculty member, from either a science or non-science discipline, your faculty advisor for more than a semester, a professor for whom you’ve worked, an employer, club advisor, supervisor of voluntary activity or research experience, camp director, chaplain, coach, or other mentor. The most useful and valuable letters comment substantively on the intellectual, interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies set forth by the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC). To find these competencies and their definitions, see

<https://www.aamc.org/admissions/dataandresearch/477182/corecompetencies.html> .

In general, it is best to ask at least one instructor from the college years to write one of your letters. Most admissions offices prefer at least one letter from this source. This referee’s letter of recommendation will demonstrate that you have your university’s academic support. A letter from a teaching or laboratory assistant is sufficient, but not optimal. If a graduate student writes the letter, s/he can ask the faculty member in charge of the course or lab to

ratify and cosign it. Alternatively, if a professor does not know you well, you may ask a TA to submit notes to the professor upon which the letter can be based.

Protocol: How to ask for a letter of recommendation

In general, ask for recommendations in a live conversation, in person. If necessary, ask by telephone or videoconference. Email is not the most effective method from a strategic perspective. Here are four questions to pose to potential recommenders:

- “Would you be willing to write a letter of recommendation for me?”
- “Do you feel it can be a strong, supportive letter?”
 - If the answer to these questions is not an enthusiastic “yes,” you may indicate that you want to do further thinking before proceeding; or you may simply say, “No thank you. I’ll try to find another recommender.”
- “May I make an appointment to come talk with you and review my qualifications?”
- “I’d like you to mention (fill in the blank) in my letter. Do you feel you could do that?” (The decision rests with the writer.)

If the answer to the first two questions is not an enthusiastic “yes,” be patient and hear the person out, even if it feels awkward. You will learn if the lack of enthusiasm relates to the writer’s own scarcity of time, or reflects an estimation of your candidacy. Both perspectives provide important information. At some point, you may indicate that you want to do further thinking before proceeding; or you may simply say, “No thank you. I’ll try to find another recommender.”

Discuss your decision to retain or waive FERPA access to the letter and make sure you have reached an understanding on this with the writer. Also make sure the recommender knows the due date for the letter and will be able to meet it and the procedure for transmitting the letter to the appropriate destination.

Material to provide for recommenders

- A résumé or summary including in some detail the development of your interest in a health profession and your goals. (If you are undecided between two health professions or planning to apply to more than one listen to the audio *Dentistry and Other Options* and/or meet with a health careers advisor before asking a recommender to write a letter of recommendation for a specific profession.)
- A printed list of the AAMC’s core competencies. You should also express your hope that the writer will use that language in the letter. This will make it easier for an admissions committee to see your suitability when reading the letter under the holistic review process.

If you are asking for letters to be written for the HCEC process you must also provide:

- The *LoR Guidelines and FERPA Intent Form*, which can be conveniently downloaded by the registrant from the HCEC website. This guides letter writers on what information health careers schools seek in letters of recommendation.
- A letter of recommendation FERPA Intent Form.
 - Note that the registrant should complete the *LoR Guidelines and FERPA Intent Form* before sending them to the letter writer. The letter writer should be aware of your decision to either waive or retain your FERPA right of access. Paper copies of the blank *LoR Guidelines and FERPA Intent Form* are available in 210 Barnes.

How many?

No more than three letters of recommendation will be used in the HCEC evaluation. Letters arriving after the first three will be retained in the file but will not be used or distributed by the HCEC. We recommend that you have three letters in your file before your HCEC interview. However, you are eligible for an interview once your file has two letters. Once received by the HCEC, you may not withdraw a letter or substitute a new letter.

If you have elected not to use the HCEC, up to ten letters of recommendation may be uploaded directly to AMCAS. Please speak to a health careers advisor to develop an application strategy.

Due Date for HCEC letters of recommendation

In order to be included with the information that is sent to the HCEC interviewer, letters of recommendation must be received by the stated due date. The interviewer needs these letters for interviewing you and for writing the letter of evaluation. Therefore, you have two important responsibilities:

1. Check with the HCEC Online File Checklist to see that when your letters of recommendation have arrived and the FERPA status of each.
2. Remind letter writers, if necessary. A written note or an e-mail reminder to the letter writer is probably more effective than telephoning or seeing him/her in person. The frequency of such reminders should be carefully considered to avoid annoying the writer.

Transfer students

Transfer students should read the Transfer Guidelines on the Health Careers web page and listen to the "Junior Transfer Orientation" in the Media Programs link of that webpage. They are encouraged to speak with a health careers advisor to get advice on their letter options.

Waiving or Not Waiving Access to Letters: FERPA

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974 requires that students be advised of their rights concerning educational records, such as letters of recommendation.

FERPA gives important rights, including:

1. The right of students to inspect their student records,
2. The right to challenge incorrect information in those records, and
3. The right to keep student records private.

Because FERPA gives students these rights, neither Cornell University nor other institutions or organizations can require you to waive these rights. University policy on access and release of student records is stated at the CU policy website.

When you establish a file for letters of recommendation (whether through a letter service or the Health Careers Evaluation Committee) you should consider your FERPA right to access the letter(s). If you decide to waive access, inform the letter writer (including the HCEC or letter service) in writing, that you have chosen to do so. If you do not provide this information, by default you have not waived this right. You can discuss this choice with those writing your letters of recommendation, and the following factors may be useful in making your decision.

Factors to consider in deciding to waive access

- If your recommender knows you well and has said he/she can write a letter in support of your candidacy, the chances are slight that inaccuracies or unfair statements will be presented in the letter.
- An employer or a member of an admissions committee might tentatively draw one or more of the following conclusions:
 - The evaluation may be more candid if the writer knew that the candidate would not see it. As a result, more weight may be assigned to such letters.
 - The candidate has nothing to conceal.
 - The candidate did not feel it was necessary to view the letter before it was sent.
 - The candidate does not wish to exercise his/her civil rights in this way.

Factors to consider in deciding not to waive access

- A potential recommender may choose not to write a letter for you unless you waive FERPA.
- You need to be prepared to explain your reasons for your choice during interview(s).
- An employer or a member of an admissions committee at a graduate or professional school receiving the letter might tentatively draw one or more of the following conclusions:
 - The evaluation may be less candid, as the writer knew that the candidate may see it. As a result, these letters may carry less weight in the decision-making process.
 - The candidate did not waive access in order to determine that recipients received full information.
 - The candidate wanted to discuss the letter with the recommender/evaluator before it was put in final draft.
 - The candidate feels a moral obligation to exercise his/her civil rights.
- You will have an idea of the information schools/employers have and, therefore, can prepare for interviews accordingly.
- By reading a letter, you have a chance of learning from any feedback it provides.
- It may relieve stress and anxiety to know exactly what has been said.
- Factual mistakes in the letter may be corrected.
- If you conclude that the letter is unfavorable, you can choose not to use the letter. **The HCEC is an exception. You may not withdraw a letter submitted to HCEC or substitute a new letter.**

Factors for HCEC registrants to consider

- You may waive or not waive the right of access to your Cornell Health Careers Evaluation Committee letter of evaluation and/or the letter(s) of recommendation in your file in any combination you choose: all, none, some.
- If you view a letter and disagree with the subjective opinion expressed or believe the information is inaccurate, you may place a rebuttal in the HCEC file; it will be sent with the letters to the professional schools.
- The HCEC process includes substantial review and oversight. It is not likely that an inaccuracy will be stated in the letter.