Letter of Recommendation Writing Toolkit

Developed by Members of the 2022-2023 NPF Clinical Practice Advisory Group

1. **PREPARATION (WHAT DO YOU NEED FROM THE CANDIDATE)**
   a. As the letter writer, the level of recommendation should be discussed with the candidate when agreeing to write the letter
      i. If there are reservations or you do not feel you can recommend the candidate, have a crucial conversation with the candidate including:
         1. Why you cannot provide a positive letter of recommendation
         2. Suggestions on what to improve, if applicable, prior to agreeing to write a letter
         3. Suggestions on next steps or guidance to the learner to identify a preceptor more equipped to write the candidate a positive letter of recommendation
      ii. Crucial conversations are important in situations with reservations or when you do not recommend a candidate:
         1. The candidate trusts you to guide them to meet their goal and achieve the position, or to navigate them to someone who can provide a stronger letter
         2. Writing a letter with reservations or not recommending without the candidate's awareness is unfair to the candidate
   b. The date when the letter of recommendation is due
   c. The name of the program/organization/job the letter of recommendation is for
      i. Highlight specifics if warranted (I.e., community residency, PGY-2 specialty, etc.)
      ii. Reason(s) the candidate is interested in the program/organization/job
   d. Student Materials
      i. CV
      ii. Any active involvement in extracurricular activities (local/state/national organizations, intern position)
      iii. Highlights or certain attributes the candidate may want mentioned to help them stand out (personal achievements, personal statement)
         1. Research projects
         2. Publications
      iv. APPE rotations completed thus far
   e. Resident Materials
      i. CV
      ii. Completed rotations
      iii. Highlights or certain attributes the candidate may want mentioned to help them stand out (personal achievements, personal statement)
         1. Research projects
         2. Publications
         3. Resident projects/presentations

2. **LOR CONTENT**

    a. Consider briefly describing your interaction with the candidate to provide additional perspective
- i. If serving as a preceptor, describe the rotation environment
- ii. If serving as a mentor, describe your experiences and interactions with the candidate

    b. Communication Skills – Written and Oral
- i. Documentation for consults and chart notes
- ii. Written and verbal handoff
- iii. Communication with other members of the healthcare team
- iv. Patient education or other patient interactions
- v. Interactions with the healthcare team during an emergency or code blue situations
- vi. Case presentations, journal clubs, Grand Rounds, poster presentations, etc.
- vii. Interactions with peers, mentors, preceptors, advisors, etc.

    c. Assertiveness
- i. Is the candidate actively engaged in their learning and actively seeking opportunities?
- ii. Consider providing details on the candidate's self-motivation

    d. Clinical Problem-Solving Skills
- i. Pharmacy consults (e.g., vancomycin, anticoagulation, renal dosing, etc.)
- ii. Clinical recommendations
- iii. Drug information questions

    e. Acceptance of Constructive Criticism
- i. How does the candidate respond to constructive criticism?
- ii. Did you notice an improvement in areas that were discussed with the candidate?

    f. Independence
- i. Does the candidate require more prompting in clinical activities and/or projects, or are tasks completed relatively independently based on expectations?
- ii. If you precept multiple learners, consider highlighting the candidate's performance if they exceed normal expectations

    g. What to do if you do not know what to write for a section?
- i. Ask other preceptors who have worked with the candidate directly for feedback and/or examples
- ii. Ask the candidate to self-assess and discuss examples in which they have showcased their skills
- iii. Be honest and note if you are unable to assess the particular skill – though, expand upon other skills you can speak to from your experience with the candidate

3. **COMPONENTS OF THE PhORCAS Recommendation Form**
    a. Evaluation of Candidate Characteristics
        i. Rating options include:
            1. Not observed
            2. Consistently fails to meet expectations
            3. Room for improvement
            4. Meets expectations
            5. Occasionally exceeds expectations
            6. Consistently exceeds expectations
        ii. Example of characteristics evaluated

        iii. Candidate characteristics for evaluation include writing, oral communication, leadership/mentoring skills, assertiveness, organization and time management, ability to prioritize and meet deadlines, ability to work with peers, problem-solving, effective patient interaction, dependability, independence and resourcefulness, ability to accept constructive criticism, emotional stability and maturity, and professionalism
            1. Pre-selected rating options are chosen with a scale

    b. Description regarding the author's relationship to the candidate
        i. Nature of the relationship
        ii. Where your interaction with the candidate occurred
        iii. Approximate amount of time spent with the candidate, practice setting observed, and circumstances
        iv. How often you observed the candidate's clinical activities and level of independence

c. Additional Narrative comments
   i. Additional free text boxes are provided to give the letter writer an opportunity to describe how the candidate's performance compares to other candidates
   ii. The writer is asked to provide 2 strengths and 2 areas for improvement that may impact their success in a pharmacy residency program
   iii. These free text boxes are an opportunity to elaborate on why you selected the ratings you did for the candidate characteristics

> *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.*
>
> [   ]
>
> 0/2000
>
> *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.*
>
> [   ]
>
> 0/2000

d. Overall recommendation (see details below)
   i. The writer is asked to select an overall recommendation concerning admission

> Please provide an overall recommendation for the candidate. *Scroll down for more dropdown options.*
>
> *Recommendation Concerning Admission
>
> Choose an answer from the dropdown:
>
> - I highly recommend this candidate
> - I recommend this candidate
> - I recommend this candidate with some reservations
> - I am not able to recommend this candidate

e. Letter of Recommendation/Opportunity to provide additional comments
   i. The writer has the option to upload a Letter of Recommendation if they would like to leave additional comments regarding the application that may not have been covered in the form or to explain their ratings in further detail
      1. If the writer wants to add additional program-specific details for an individual program, they can do so in their letter of recommendation
         a. Examples include details about fit, a desired rotation, etc.
      2. It is most helpful to programs reviewing applications if letter writers provide specific, detailed examples

f. Once a writer has completed one recommendation, they have the opportunity to reuse the evaluation for that applicant, as writers tend to receive multiple requests from one applicant.
   i. If the writer chooses the reuse option, no additional edits can be made to the evaluation
   ii. If the writer wants to submit a letter of recommendation that is program specific, they should choose to not reuse the evaluation
   iii. Additional resources and tools for completing a recommendation can be found at https://help.liaisonedu.com/Letters_by_Liaison_Help_Center

Images from: https://www.ashp.org/-/media/assets/professional-development/residencies/docs/1023-PhORCAS-Recommendation-Form.pdf

4. **LEVEL OF RECOMMENDATION**
   a. Ensure the final recommendation for a candidate is supported by the written content of the letter
   b. Provide your true recommendation based on your interactions with the candidate
      i. Inflating a recommendation (e.g., highly recommending when you truly have reservations) can be misleading to programs
      ii. Candidates with "highly recommend" selected are not necessarily more likely to receive an interview compared to candidates with "recommend"
         1. An evaluation reported that 55.2% of candidates with a combination of "highly recommend" and "recommend" will be considered for an interview, compared to candidates with at least one "highly recommend" (14.1%) and all references with "highly recommend" (9.3%) (Skrupky L, et al. *J Amer Col Clin Phar* 2021;4:379-389)
   c. 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

5. **TIPS AND TRICKS**
   a. Use strong and illustrative verbs (e.g., Active Verbs | Writing Recommendation Letters Online (psu.edu))
   b. Be specific – it is important to demonstrate connection to the candidate to authenticate your credibility as their letter writer
   c. Be honest and genuine
   d. Do not agree to write a letter for a candidate if it will not be in strong support of their endeavor
   e. Have someone else read your letter to provide insight/feedback
   f. Address relevant information and experiences; avoid discussing content not pertinent to the recommendation or prospective job/residency

Additional Resources:
1. Brazeale, et al, **Tips for writing a letter of recommendation as a new practitioner pharmacist**, *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy*, Volume 80, Issue 5, 1 March 2023, Pages 245–248, https://doi.org/10.1093/ajhp/zxac309

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