

## CaRMS TIPS FOR STUDENTS

# WRITING A STRONG REFERENCE LETTER

A strong letter of support can mean the world to a deserving student and help universities make the best match for their residency programs.

You may have written dozens of letters in your career, or this may be your first one. In either case, please take time to review and prepare for this important task. We hope this tip sheet, developed by the UGME Student Affairs Office, will give you some guidance for writing better letters and, in turn, lead to better match success for our students.

## Be honest

Students are depending on their referees to write strong letters of support, and residency programs need to trust those letters are truthful.

It is important to only accept the invitation to recommend a student if you can honestly write him or her a strong letter of support.

If you have concerns about your ability to do so, for example, you're too busy, you don't know the student well enough or you don't think he or she is a good candidate, you should be honest and decline the request.

Being honest from the get-go about your concerns is difficult, but it is much better than writing a letter that is tepid, not supportive or poorly written.

What's more, you give the student time to find a stronger referee.

### Instead of:

"Sure I can write you a letter" (silently saying "I don't think it will be very strong")

### Say something like:

"I enjoyed our time working together, but don't feel like I had enough time with you to write the strong letter that I think you deserve."

"Unfortunately I am overwhelmed with other commitments right now and can't give your letter the attention it deserves."

"I think you'll be a great doctor, but I'm not going to be able to write a letter that is honest and supportive for this residency pathway."

## Avoid conflicts of interest

You will be required to attest that you have written the letter yourself, not signed a letter written by the student, that the student has not seen the letter, and that you have no undeclared conflicts of interests (e.g. You are related to the referee).

While the vast majority of referees would never consider being dishonest, it is important to put the rules there to protect students and the process from those who would.



## Follow the CaRMS rules

CaRMS puts out some brief guidelines for referees – make sure your letter includes all the necessary information and is submitted in time for the deadline.

For the 2019 match the directions were as follows:

In order to ensure programs receive the information they need to evaluate applicants, reference letters should include:

- A confidentiality statement indicating that the applicant has not seen the letter
- The date the letter was written
- The time and duration of your contact with the applicant
- Assessment of the applicant's
  - Cognitive skills and knowledge
  - Problem solving and patient management skills
  - Behaviour and attitudinal skills
  - Communication skills and working relationships
  - Motivation and punctuality
  - Sense of responsibility
  - Procedural skills specific to the discipline
  - Special qualities and unique contributions
- If you are unable to comment on an applicant's performance in any of these categories, you should indicate in your letter that you have not observed or do not have knowledge of that specific component.

Check the CaRMS website to ensure that the referee guidelines are similar for the current year.

The current guidelines can be found at:

<https://www.CaRMS.ca/match/r-1-main-residency-match/referee/reference-guidelines-r1-referee/>

## Consider CanMEDS

In addition to the CaRMS rules, consider commenting specifically on which CanMEDS roles you think the applicant displays, and how they do so.

The CanMEDS roles can be found here:

Royal College

<http://www.royalcollege.ca/rcsite/CanMEDS/CanMEDS-framework-end>

College of Family Physicians

[https://www.cfpc.ca/uploadedfiles/resources/resource\\_items/health\\_professionals/CanMEDS-family-medicine-2017-eng.pdf](https://www.cfpc.ca/uploadedfiles/resources/resource_items/health_professionals/CanMEDS-family-medicine-2017-eng.pdf)

## Make sure you know the student well

We have advised students that the strongest letters come from preceptors who have had exposure to them in their clinical clerkships, so expect to hear primarily from students who have worked with you on core rotations or electives.

If you can, meet with the student in advance or exchange some emails. You can then inquire why they are applying to a particular specialty/program and what they would like you to offer in support in your letter.

Be clear on whether the student is requesting one letter of support, or multiple letters (e.g. A student may apply to both internal medicine and family medicine, and request two different letters for the two program types.) Review his or her CV and highlight areas of importance to the particular residency.

Talk to colleagues and residents about the student's performance to gather supporting information.

## Write early

If you commit to writing a reference letter for a student, make notes about that student during/at the end of his or her rotation.

These notes will be invaluable in writing an honest and supportive letter when the official request comes (usually in the fall).

You may even want to have a draft version of the letter prepared in advance, so you are not overwhelmed with requests in the final weeks before CaRMS.

You will have many other students rotating with you between now and CaRMS – make sure you give this student the best possible chance by writing down what you will need to remember him or her!

## Tell a story and use specific examples

A strong reference letter will help residency programs to understand the applicant and why he or she is a strong candidate. Using examples to support comments about an applicant's skills will paint a more vivid and personal picture of the candidate for the residency program director. Program directors rely on this sort of narrative feedback to decide who stands out from the applicant pool.

Instead of:

"Lisa is an intelligent, caring person who will make a great pediatrician"

Say something like:

"On one encounter in my clinic, Lisa helped break bad news to a family about their child's recent diagnosis of developmental delay. Not only did she clearly understand the diagnosis and its implications for the child, but was able to explain this to the family with compassion in a plain language that increased their understanding. It is this combination of intelligence and sensitivity that will make her a great pediatrician."

## Use words and space wisely

Program directors will read a lot of letters – a minimum of three per candidate – so you want to make their job easier.

The first paragraph of your letter should clearly explain who you are and your relationship to the student. The last paragraph of your letter should summarize your thoughts about the candidate, including whether you would welcome them as a colleague in your field or where you see their career trajectory.

Length is important. A letter that is too short risks not saying enough; a letter that is too long risks being skimmed.

There is no definitive length for strong reference letters, but if your letter is less than one typed page or much longer than two, consider whether you need to add some detail, such as an illustrative story, or require editing for clarity.

### Turn a negative into a positive, when appropriate

While you should only accept the invitation to write a reference letter when you can write a strong letter, there is no perfect candidate. An honest assessment of the student's strengths and weaknesses signals to the residency programs your assessment is forthright and complete.

In this process, you can turn many negatives into neutral or even positive statements by focusing on the student's growth and ability to improve. Commenting on how the student has grown and matured through the rotation can be very impactful.

#### Instead of:

"Henry's big weakness was his ability to get his work done"

#### Say something like:

"Henry is an exceptional student in terms of his work ethic and his ability to engage with patients. One area he worked really hard to improve was the speed of note writing, which is a common challenge for early clerkship students.

By the end of the three week block his effort was evident in his notes, which were at the level of a first year resident and completed in a timely manner."

### Compare the candidate to others at a similar level

The residency match is a competitive process, so it is fair to compare students to other learners at a similar level.

Comment on when you saw the student (e.g. at the beginning, middle or end of the core clerkship year) and how the student compared to others at the same level of training.

What did this student do that made them stand out from the crowd? Avoid calling all students "the most exceptional trainee I have ever worked with" unless they truly are, as that can really only apply to a tiny fraction of trainees and is rarely an honest assessment of the learner.

If you overuse your highest level of recommendation it will ring hollow after a while and won't flag the truly exceptional students. Using phrases like "I would welcome this student into my residency program (as opposed to "your" residency program) sends a subtle signal to the program director that you stand behind this student and support them.

### Proofread, proofread, and then proofread again

Put as much care into proofreading your letter for the candidate as if you were writing your own letter of application – check that the student's name and all relevant details are correct, check that your credentials are clearly listed. You do not want spelling mistakes, grammatical errors or innocent mix-ups to reflect poorly on the candidate. Running the letter past a confidential third party (e.g. your administrative assistant) prior to its submission is a good way to clean up these errors.

### Check your letters for gender and ethnic bias

There is good evidence implicit bias shapes letter writing.

Referees write letters differently for men vs. women, and for applicants from underrepresented groups vs. those from majority groups.

For example, referees are more likely to comment on a female applicant's effort (e.g. "she is a hard worker") and more likely to comment on a male applicant's perceived talents (e.g. "he has the hands to be a great surgeon").

Letters for minority candidates have been shown to mention grindstone adjectives (hardworking, dependable) less often, and communal adjectives (affectionate, nurturing) more often than those for other candidates.

Assessing your own biases and confronting them is a lifelong obligation of all educators. We strongly encourage you to review your letters for common biases and to address them.

For example, you could write a draft where you change the name of the applicant from a female to a male name and re-read the letter to yourself if the letter still rings true.

If not, is there some gender bias that could be addressed/edited? Below we have included several links to tip sheets from other universities that can help you improve your letters and avoid these biases.

### Resources

This link to the University of Toronto reference letter toolkit has some more great tips for effective CaRMS letters, and examples and analysis of both strong and weak letters:

[http://md.utoronto.ca/sites/default/files/reference%20letter%20toolkit.pdf%20final%20\(2\).pdf](http://md.utoronto.ca/sites/default/files/reference%20letter%20toolkit.pdf%20final%20(2).pdf)

This document from the University of Arizona (not medicine specific) has some great tips for avoiding gender bias in your letters for reference:

[https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding\\_gender\\_bias\\_in\\_letter\\_of\\_reference\\_writing.pdf](https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding_gender_bias_in_letter_of_reference_writing.pdf)

This online tool will analyze your reference letter for gender bias. While it is only one way to assess the quality of your letter, running it through this online tool may help you uncover some hidden or unintended biases in your writing style:

<https://www.tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/>

