



# Atrium Health

## Cure for the Common Letter During Uncommon Times

Empowering Residency Administrators as Gatekeepers  
of the Letter of Recommendation

Developed by: Cameron K. Davis, MA

This presentation is intended for the use and benefit of neurosurgery residency program administrators. Please discuss with Cameron Davis before distributing the presentation to others. Thank you.

# Disclosures

- None

# Session Objectives

1. Understand the significance of letters of recommendation in residency applications – especially during a rapidly changing recruitment environment (virtual, at-a-distance, potentially temporary/what components will stay?)
2. Understand our roles as the “Gatekeepers of the Letter of Recommendation”
3. Interpret common language used in letters of recommendation
4. Identify the components of effective letters of recommendation

How important are letters of recommendation to the application?

# Uncommon Times

- All recruitment has been virtual (Virtual Q&As, use of videos, enhanced webpages)
- Temporarily fewer Sub-Interns
- Saw an increase in number of applicants per program
- Applicants accepting more interviews as cost and timing of travel no longer an issue
- Some concern that all the programs will be interviewing all the same “top” applicants... leaving a number of programs and candidates unmatched
  - Did not see this come to fruition in previous recruitment season!
- USMLE Step 1 scores now pass/fail

**How do you know which applicants are a good match for your program/worth interviewing?**

# Neurosurgery LoR Template 2022

## NEUROLOGICAL SURGERY RESIDENCY RECOMMENDATION FORM (FILLABLE FORM)

Applicant Name: \_\_\_\_\_ AAMC Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Institution: \_\_\_\_\_

As recommended by the NRMP, letter of recommendation templates can assist to improve the quality, granularity, and consistency of applicant evaluations.

Reference Provided By: \_\_\_\_\_ Reference Writer's Institution: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Specialty: \_\_\_\_\_

Local Leadership position (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

**Compared to neurosurgery applicants your program evaluated in the last Match, please rate this applicant.**

**Please note this curve pertains only to neurosurgery applicants; most applicants should fall in the 11-50% range. 6-10% is outstanding and 2-5% is exceptional. Top 1% is rarely used.**

	Top 1%	2-5%	6-10%	11-25%	26-50%	51-100%	N/A
<b>Patient Care:</b> Ability to do the neurological exam, develop and justify an appropriate differential diagnosis and treatment plan, and work with patients, families and other teams to provide care	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>Medical knowledge:</b> Level of general medical and neurosurgical knowledge:	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>Procedural and Technical Skill:</b> Surgical intuition, ability to learn new techniques, ability to help cases more forward:	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>Research:</b> Ability to identify a question, engage the literature, execute a research plan, research work ethic, problem-solving abilities, and communicate results:	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>Initiative and Drive:</b> Self-directed, Ability to identify a need and see tasks to completion:	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>Professionalism and Communication:</b> Maturity, assumes responsibility, attention to requirements, team player:	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>Coachability:</b> Responds to correction immediately with insight, subsequently performs task correctly, resilient:	<input type="radio"/>						

# Neurosurgery LoR Template 2022

**Overall Assessment**  
How would you assess the applicant compared to neurosurgery applicants your program evaluated in the last Match?

Top 1%	2-5%	6-10%	11-25%	26-50%	51-100%	N/A
<input type="radio"/>						
**	**					

\*\*SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OR RATIONALE REQUESTED IN THE NARRATIVE FOR APPLICANTS MERITING A CHECK BOX IN THE TOP 1% OR 2-5%.

**Narrative Information**

Please add resident comments from the applicant's rotation:

Please summarize your experience with the applicant, including length and degree of interaction, and define unique qualities that benefit or detract from the applicant's potential to excel in neurosurgical training (no limit, if more room is needed, please add an additional sheet):

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**Narrative Information**

Please add resident comments from the applicant's rotation:

[Empty text box for resident comments]

Please summarize your experience with the applicant, including length and degree of interaction, and define unique qualities that benefit or detract from the applicant's potential to excel in neurosurgical training (no limit, if more room is needed, please add an additional sheet):

[Large empty text box for narrative information, circled in red]

# The Importance of Letters of Recommendation



“How important are an applicant’s letters of recommendation to you in shaping your overall impression of the quality of the applicant?”

- 399 (85%) – important
- 418 (89%) – they would consider a weaker candidate more favorably with a well-crafted LoR
- 296 (63%) – they would consider a strong candidate less favorably if the LoR was poorly crafted

# The Importance of Letters of Recommendation

As some residency and fellowship training programs receive hundreds of applications each year, many applicants are “**highly recommended**” with similar:

1. board scores ✓
2. medical school grades ✓
3. scholarly activity ✓

This makes it difficult to distinguish between them.

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# The Importance of Letters of Recommendation



USMLE changing **Step 1 score** reporting from 3-digit numeric score to reporting only a **pass/fail** outcome:

- January 1, 2022
- “can help reduce some of the current overemphasis on USMLE performance” and encourage a look at the candidate as a whole
- Numeric score still reported for Step 2 CK (clinical knowledge)

(<https://www.usmle.org/incus/#decision>)

# The Importance of Letters of Recommendation

As a result, letters of recommendation become **even more critical in differentiating between applicants with similar objective attributes.**

(DeZee, Thomas, Mintz, & Durning, 2009; Love, Smith, Weizberg, Doty, Garra, Avegno, & Howell, 2014; Girzadas, Harwood, Delis, Stevison, Keng, Cipparrone, Carlson, & Tsonis, 2000.)

# Administrators as Gatekeepers

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# Gatekeepers

This gives us a unique opportunity to be an advocate for the students who rotate with our programs – who waive their right to see these letters – and to potentially prevent some of the letters we upload from unintentionally doing harm to the student's application.

Additionally, when we know what to look for in letters of recommendation, we become an even more meaningful part of the interview and application review process.

We can also advocate for our residents who apply for fellowships and in their next steps beyond residency!

# Part 1: Decoding the Secret Language in Letters of Recommendation

# Doubt Raisers

**Doubt raisers** are defined as negative language that carry the potential to raise doubt in the mind of the reader.

Examples include:

- Unexplained comments
- Faint praise
- Irrelevancies
- Hedges
- Potentially negative comments

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Remember these!  
We'll come back to them later  
in the module.

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- **Potentially negative comments**



For now, let's concentrate on **potentially negative comments**.

# Potentially Negative Comments

**Potentially negative comments** are not written to purposely raise doubt in the mind of the reader or reflect negatively on the applicant, but this can be an unintended consequence.



(Trix & Psenka, 2003)

# Potentially Negative Comments

Three examples of potentially negative comments relating specifically to recommendation letters for medical students and residents are:

1. Use of the word “strong”
2. Use of the word “consider”
3. The author’s recruitment of the applicant to his/her own program or institution

# Use of the word “strong”

If an applicant is described as “**strong**,” this could be perceived *negatively*.

A “strong applicant” or “strong candidate” is, ironically, not always perceived as strong. Instead, look for applicants described using superlatives such as outstanding, extraordinary, or exceptional.

**OUTSTANDING**

extraordinary

Exceptional

# Use of the word “consider”

The word “**consider**” does not reflect well on the applicant!

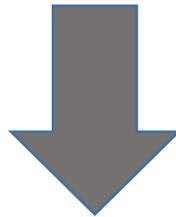
If an author is “considering” the applicant for an interview or their own rank list, or will be giving the applicant strong “consideration,” this usually indicates they are not committing to rank the applicant highly.



# Use of the word “consider”

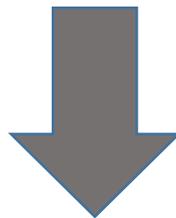
“We will be *considering* him/her for our own rank list.”

Bad



“We are *considering* him/her for an interview with our own program.”

Worse



“We hope YOU will *consider* him/her for an interview with YOUR program.”

Worst

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*competitive at our program as in many others, and realizing, I am only one opinion in the Department, I am going to die on the hill that allows him to be one of the select three that matches in our program.* The possibility of having him for the next seven years a [REDACTED] would be

# Author's recruitment of the applicant

Wording this endorsement in a way that doesn't seem to speak on behalf of the applicant would be less potentially harmful to his/her chances with other programs. For example:

*"We understand (applicant's name)'s desire to take a broad look at other programs, but we would be delighted if (he/she) decided to train here."*

Or

*"We plan to rank (applicant's name) at the top of our list and would be delighted if (he/she) matched with our program."*

# Author's recruitment of the applicant

This becomes meaningless, however, if a single author says this about every student they endorse.

# Part 2: Components of Effective Letters of Recommendation

# Generic letters

Programs frequently receive letters of recommendation that are generic in nature.

Generic letters add nothing to the application and do little to distinguish one applicant from another.

# Specific examples

To help an applicant stand out amongst his/her peers, use **specific examples** in the letter!

- ✓ Describe a specific instance where the student or resident excelled.
- ✓ Highlight the applicant's qualities by writing about a personal experience.
- ✓ If using a string of adjectives to describe the applicant, back them up with specific examples of behavior or personality.

# Specific examples

*“Unless there are specific examples, all of the preamble is fluff.”*

-Program Director, ACGME-accredited Orthopaedic Surgery Residency Program

# Comparative statements

Use of **comparative statements** in the letter enhances the value of the endorsement.

How does the applicant compare to his/her peers in the applicant pool?

Examples include phrases that describe the applicant similarly to the following:

- Top 5% of this year's class
  - One of the best this year (or in recent years)
  - Top student to rotate at the author's institution, etc.
- May happen as part of new standardized LoR template and no need to include in narrative

# Comparative statements

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# Know your audience

Is the student/resident you are recommending applying to a medical specialty or a surgical specialty?

It's important to consider this when writing a letter of recommendation. Different specialties may be looking for different information within the letters.

# Medical specialties

**Medical specialties** are looking for information about the applicant's:

- Reliability
- Professionalism
- Character
- Interaction with staff
- Interaction with patients
- Interpersonal skills/sensitivities

Be sure to touch on these items to the best of your ability in the letter!

# Surgical specialties/fellowships

**Surgical specialties** are looking for information about the applicant's:

- Technical and surgical skills
- Comfort in the operating room
  - Program Directors become suspicious if this is NOT included
- Leadership qualities
- Endurance
- Signs of initiative
  - An example includes presentations given during time spent on your service
  - Dr. Mulvaney pitched a Diversity in Neurosurgery Scholarship Fund for medical students with a background from a population underrepresented in neurosurgery to rotate with our program, obtained funding, headed up the website content update, etc.

# Medical and Surgical specialties

**Both types of specialties** are looking for references to:

- Research project efforts/interests/achievements
- Academic potential
- Clinical skills and medical knowledge
- Applicant's motivations for choosing this specialty/fellowship

# Length of the letter

The length of the letter is a factor in its effectiveness.

If the letter is too short, it reflects poorly on the applicant.

This could be interpreted as a lack of familiarity with the applicant or, perhaps, a lack of anything positive to say.

# Length of the letter

The following is an example of a letter in which the length is a factor in its effectiveness:

June 26, 201█

Re: █

To the Residency Program Director,

It is a pleasure for me to write this strong letter of support for █ who is applying to your program.

We were thrilled to have her as a sub-intern here at █ and she really did a great job.

She got along extremely well with all of the staff and faculty, as well as the residents, and did an outstanding job on the wards. She is a very pleasant person and is very interested in a career in academic █.

We look forward to having her come back for an interview and I would recommend that you do the same.

Sincerely,

5 sentences!

# Gendered language

If you are writing a letter of recommendation for a woman, be mindful of the language you include and eliminate any potential elements of gender and unconscious bias!

# Gendered language



# Gendered language

The best letters of recommendation are ripe with descriptive language!  
This can prove to be **negative for women**, however, when including phrases that:

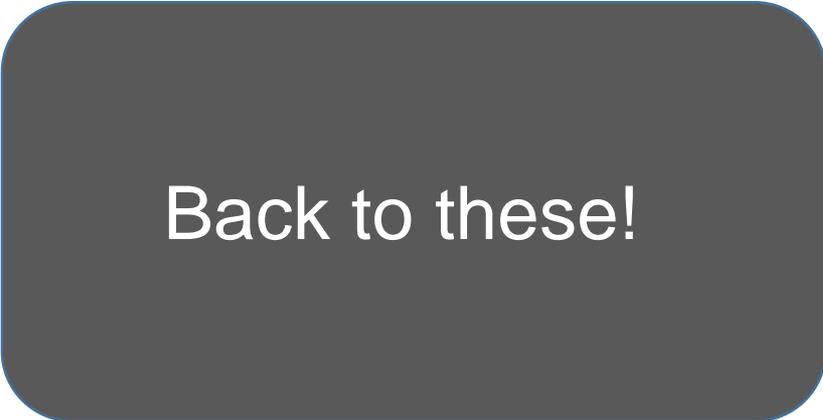
-  Portray them in the role of simply student or teacher as opposed to focusing on professional accomplishments
-  Contain stereotypical terms
-  Contain adjectival expressions that use words exclusively feminine in nature
-  Seize the opportunity to describe the applicant's appearance

# Gendered language

**Doubt raisers** are defined as negative language that carry the potential to raise doubt in the mind of the reader.

Examples include:

- **Unexplained comments**
- **Faint praise**
- **Irrelevancies**
- **Hedges**
- Potentially negative comments



Back to these!

# Gendered language

## Male applicants

Letters are less likely to contain *doubt raisers*.

## Female applicants

Letters are more likely to contain at least one *doubt raiser*. Multiple doubt raisers build on each other, causing the reader to increasingly question the applicant's qualifications.

### Examples of doubt raisers:

**Irrelevancies:** "He is very active in church."

While not innately or purposely negative, the overall result may raise doubt in the mind of the reader. Did the author have nothing more substantive to say?

**Hedges:** "She appears to be a highly motivated student."

Using "appears" or "seems" when describing an applicant implies the author is not confident in his/her statement.

**Unexplained Statement:** "Now that she has chosen to change her specialty..."

Involves the inclusion of a statement that could be potentially negative if an explanation is not provided for the reader. Why did she change specialties?

**Faint Praise:** "I have every confidence he will become better than average." or "She worked hard on projects that she accepted."

Recommenders may believe they are more credible when including some negative points in their letters. These negative comments, however, are often more memorable and may be what stands out most to the readers, overshadowing any of the positive attributes.

# Gendered language

Male applicants	Female applicants
Letters more likely to include adjective “ <b>successful</b> ” and the nouns “ <b>accomplishment</b> ” and “ <b>achievement</b> ”	Letters more likely to include descriptions like “ <b>compassionate</b> ” and “ <b>relates well to patients and staff</b> ”
Often portrayed as <b>researchers</b> and <b>professionals</b> . “his research,” “his skills and abilities,” “his career”	Often portrayed as <b>students</b> and <b>teachers</b> . “her training,” “her teaching,” “her application” (for the position)
Letters tend to include more <b>standout adjectives</b> (excellent, superb, outstanding, unique, exceptional, and unparalleled)	Letters tend to include fewer <b>standout adjectives</b> (excellent, superb, outstanding, unique, exceptional, and unparalleled)
Less likely to receive <b>letters of minimal assurance</b> . Letters for male applicants are more likely to contain all of the following components: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>(1) commitment and relationship of recommender with the applicant;</li><li>(2) some specificity of focus and record of the applicant, and</li><li>(3) some evaluation or comparison of traits and accomplishments of the applicant.</li></ol>	More likely to receive <b>letters of minimal assurance</b> , or letters that are missing at least one of the following three components: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>(1) commitment and relationship of recommender with the applicant;</li><li>(2) some specificity of focus and record of the applicant, and</li><li>(3) some evaluation or comparison of traits and accomplishments of the applicant.</li></ol>

# Gendered language

Examples of adjectives that are stereotypically feminine in nature:

- Caring
- Warm
- Supportive
- Understanding
- Dependable
- Sympathetic
- Soft spoken
- Nurturing
- Cheerful
- Beautiful
- Pretty
- Shy
- Emotional
- Helpful
- Sensitive



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Avoid using these adjectives as they evoke gender stereotypes that can be harmful to the applicant's chances!



# Gendered language

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- Caring
- Warm
- Supportive
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- Dependable
- Sympathetic
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Use these adjectives when:

1) you can support them with specific examples to provide evidence of their relevance, and

2) tailoring your letter to certain specialties that prefer evidence of interpersonal skills.

Otherwise, these adjectives can potentially harm the applicant's chances.



# Real Life Examples

# Gendered language

██████ is bright, energetic, forthright and attractive.

# Gendered language

██████ is bright, energetic, forthright and attractive.

# Gendered language

██████████ is bright, energetic, forthright and attractive.

She is confident but not pushy,



# Gendered language

Female applicant:

**[REDACTED]** She is currently married and has a young daughter who is healthy.

# Gendered language

## Female applicant:

[REDACTED] She is currently married and has a young daughter who is healthy.

## Male applicant:

[REDACTED] His wife [REDACTED] is also a fitness buff, she is a surgical nurse practitioner, and they have a 9-month-old child.

[REDACTED] He is happily married and has a very supportive family.

# Gendered language

Female applicant (potentially negative comments):

She demonstrated significant initiative and did not need to be reminded to accomplish various assignments, even when they were somewhat detailed.

# Gendered language

Female applicant:

She demonstrated significant initiative and did not need to be reminded to accomplish various assignments, even when they were somewhat detailed.



Same author, same year



Male applicant:

He reliably performed all tasks given to him.

# Gendered language

## Original sentence for female applicant:

She demonstrated significant initiative and did not need to be reminded to accomplish various assignments, even when they were somewhat detailed.

## Revised:

She demonstrated significant initiative and accomplished every task she was assigned.

# Session Summary

When both reading and writing letters of recommendation, language matters!

# Session Summary

- Be mindful of potentially negative comments, generic letters, and gendered language that may unintentionally harm a student's chances:
  - See yourself as a **valuable member of the “selection committee”** when reviewing applications for your program
    - You can now decode the secret language in letters
  - Feel **empowered** to trust your gut when something doesn't feel right
  - Feel **empowered** to ask questions about letters before you upload
    - “Is this what you intended...?”

For more information about this training module, please  
contact:

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Atrium Health

[Cameron.Davis@atriumhealth.org](mailto:Cameron.Davis@atriumhealth.org)

