

Writing Informative Letters of Reference

Darilyn V. Moyer MD
Temple University School of
Medicine

Dean's Letter Writers

- Account for gaps in training
- Discuss circumstances of failed/conditioned courses
- Clarify discrepancies between final and clinical grades; NBME scores
- Distribution of grades for clinical rotations
- Describe commitments above and beyond usual expectations
- Your school's USMLE graduation requirements

Optimizing the Strength of IM Applicants

- Excellent clinical medicine grades/velocity of growth
- Superb letters from preceptors with significant contact time
- Departmental letters which clarify clinical/NBME/final grades
- Excellent interviews and interactions with housestaff and residency coordinators
- Personal statements used as a springboard for interview questions
- Less emphasis on basic science/USMLE scores

Writing Individual Letters

- Opening paragraph should include a statement of rotation type, length, contact time, and type of contact
- Statement of the types of observation- eg bedside skills, interactions with patients/HCWs, oral presentations, written notes/H&Ps

Assessment of Performance

- Clarify benchmarks for grades eg RIME correlations
- Student's performance compared to your institution's benchmarks
- Address all ACGME competencies
- Give specific examples
- Clarify clinical/final grade discrepancies
- Address responses to constructive criticism
- Address learning style & extra efforts
- Address whether you would want to have the applicant join your institution's program

Letter Writing DON'Ts

- Don't write if you cannot give the applicant the type of letter you believe they expect
- Offer them guidance in who might be able to write a future letter (eg subinternship/elective preceptor)
- Fund of knowledge comments significantly outweighed by comments regarding character
- Sketchy description of type/time of contact
- Don't write it unless the applicant waives their access right (a red flag for Program Directors)