How to Write a Good and Honest Letter of Recommendation

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University of Pittsburgh Medical Center
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“Fantasy Land” – R.Friedman, 1983

TONIGHT I traveled to a wondrous place, a fantasy land of sugarplums and fairy tales. Since some of you may never have the opportunity to visit this glorious place, let me tell you about it. It is a land where everyone "will make a fine physician," where people have "excellent interpersonal skills" and "good rapport with their peers." In this land about a tenth of the inhabitants are "among the finest I have ever worked with," a full quarter are "outstanding," and almost all are "in the upper quarter." Everyone is "a pleasure to work with," has "excellent initiative," is . . .
How to Write a Good and Honest Letter of Recommendation For Your BEST Fellow

Katie Berlacher, MD MS, FACC
University of Pittsburgh Medical Center
@kberlacher
Objective

• Name 3 things that are *perceived to be important* in LOR

• List 1 phrases that are often *interpreted negatively*

Disclaimer: I really don’t like writing LORs.
Disclaimer: I only find ~20% of the LORs that I read to be helpful
During Recruitment Season...

University of Pittsburgh
Department of Medicine

April 18, 2018

RE: Agnes Koczo, MD

I am pleased to provide a letter of recommendation for Agnes Koczo, MD, a resident in the Internal Medicine program at the University of Pittsburgh. She has recently completed her medical training at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her BA from Wesleyan University

Agnes received many honors and was unanimously selected as the student of the year. She is a well-deserved honor and a true gift to our program.

In our program, Agnes has consistently demonstrated excellence in her work. Her clinical skills and research abilities are outstanding.

Applicant Name: Agnes Koczo, MD

Dear Cardiology Fellowship Committee Members:

It is with great enthusiasm that I write this letter in consideration of Agnes Koczo as a potential candidate for your fellowship program. Agnes has shown a strong interest in cardiology and has excelled in her rotations both in our CCU team and on the heart failure team. Her dedication and commitment to clinical research projects focused on cardiovascular diseases have been exceptional.

Dr. Koczo is a highly skilled clinician and researcher. She has demonstrated excellence in clinical care and has a strong background in relevant literature. Her ability to adapt and excel in various clinical settings is truly remarkable.

Given her interest in Women's health and cardiovascular research, her recent paper on the impact of exercise on heart failure outcomes is noteworthy. Dr. Koczo has co-authored several papers in this field and has presented her research at national and international conferences.

Overall, I strongly recommend Agnes Koczo for your fellowship program. She is a superb candidate with a strong track record of success and a passion for cardiology.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

UPMC Heart and Vascular Institute
HVI - Cardiology
UPMC Presbyterian
Dennis M. McKenna, MD
Director
Center for Heart Failure Research
Professor of Medicine
University of Pittsburgh
School of Medicine

Scale Hall, Suite 515
200 Lothrop Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
T: 412-647-6590
F: 412-644-0130
Appointments: 1-844-UPMC-REF (1-844-876-2733)
Dr. Koczo's status as a resident for the upcoming year will be determined in the near future.

June 29, 2018

To the Selection Committee

Cardiology Fellowship Program

Re: Agnes Koczo

I am delighted to provide this letter of recommendation for Agnes Koczo. Her outstanding performance and dedication to her work make her an excellent candidate for your fellowship program.

Agnes Koczo has demonstrated a strong commitment to her field of study. Her research contributions in the area of cardiovascular disease have been recognized both nationally and internationally. Her ability to work effectively in a team setting and her leadership qualities are exceptional.

I believe that Agnes Koczo would make an invaluable addition to your fellowship program. Her expertise and experience would greatly enhance the overall training experience for your residents.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
Standardized LOR for Residency PDs

SLOR have a specific:

• **Length:** Two pages
• **Content:**
  – Program Description
  – Competency Achievement with examples
  – Scholarly Work
  – Characteristics and skills beyond residency requirements
  – Performance related extensions, probation
  – Overall assessment of candidate’s suitability

## Narrative vs. Standardized LOR

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<th>NLOR</th>
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<td>Variation in terminology</td>
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<td>Meaningful comparison of applicants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Institution/program characteristics</td>
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<td>Always mentioned</td>
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February 26, 2019

To Whom It May Concern,

I write this letter in support of Dr. Brent Lampert’s application for fellowship in the Cardiovascular Fellowship program at UPMC Heart and Vascular Institute. I have known Dr. Lampert since his residency at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, from which he completed in 2012. He remained here for a year in the Cardiac Transplantation fellowship, during which he also attained a Master of Business Administration degree.

Dr. Lampert is a standout individual with an excellent academic background and a strong work ethic. He has consistently demonstrated his potential as a cardiovascular specialist through his leadership roles and outstanding contributions to the field. His strong communication skills and ability to foster a positive and collaborative work environment have been critical to his success and will undoubtedly continue to be so.

Dr. Lampert has a keen interest in understanding the social determinants of health and the racial and socioeconomic disparities in cardiovascular medicine. He has completed an MBA degree during medical school to help her understand the socioeconomic impact on patient outcomes and the potential solutions for health care disparities in cardiovascular medicine. He has demonstrated expertise in structured pathways, such as the Adult Congenital Heart Disease Pathway, guaranteeing her protected time to further her investigative skills and research in this area.

Dr. Lampert is the inaugural student on the cardiology T32 training grant, guaranteeing at least 75% protected time for research. He has already involved himself in patient-oriented research aimed at improving outcomes in valve disease.

I have had the pleasure of working closely with Dr. Lampert and can confidently recommend him for the Cardiovascular Fellowship program at UPMC. He is a dedicated and highly competent individual who will make a valuable contribution to the program.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Director
Cardiovascular Fellowship Program
UPMC Heart and Vascular Institute

Kathryn L. Berlacher, MD, MS, FACC
Assistant Professor of Medicine
Survey of 1079 pediatric fellowship and residency PD/APDs; 43% response rate; published June 2018

Three topics:
- Importance of LOR features
- Importance of applicant abilities
- Perceptions of commonly used phrases
Letter Features – more important

- Depth of interaction with applicant: 97%
- Specific traits of applicant: 96%
- Applicant’s abilities: 95%
- Summative statement on strength of recommendation: 84%
- Personal stories about the applicant: 61%

Saudek et al, JGME, 2018
Letter Features – less important

- Program/hospital activities: 53%
- Academic rank of letter writer: 45%
- Competency-based framework: 41%
- Participation in research: 40%
- Short letter ≤ 3 paragraphs: 39%
- Community service activities: 38%
- Applicant’s advanced degrees: 27%
- Long letter ≥ 4 paragraphs: 24%

Saudek et al, JGME, 2018
Mixed emotions on these...

- Indicating tier of applicant
- Commenting on clinical reasoning abilities
- Commenting on communication skills
- LOR writer’s experience with learners
- Rebutability of LOR writer
Thoughts?
Perception of Phrases

- I give my highest recommendation
- Would like applicant to stay at our institution
- Exceeded expectations
- I highly recommend
- Will be an asset to any program
- I recommend without reservation
- Overcame personal setbacks
- I recommend
- Solid performance
- Showed improvement
- Performed at expected level

Saudek et al, JGME, 2018
How to Write a **Good** LOR

- Be timely and grammatically correct
- Include your interaction with applicant
- Provide examples
- Make a summary statement
How to Write an *Honest* LOR

- Put yourself in the reader’s shoes – what would you want to know?
- Be factual, not emotional
- Be specific
- Include a statement about your desire to discuss the applicant over a call
- Use the negatively perceived phrases (?)
Be **honest** about yourself…

- Implicit bias can sneak into LORs
- Most reported is gender bias
- Likely other bias creeps in
- Check your language!!
  - Research vs Teaching
  - Accomplishment vs Compassionate
  - Use of **Doubt Raisers** – ‘it appears that…’ ‘while she has not done…’
Final Tips:

• **Most important things to include in LOR:**
  – Depth of interaction
  – Character traits and abilities
  – Summative recommendation statement
  – Personal story

• **Negatively perceived statements:**
  – ‘solid performance’ ‘showed improvement’ ‘performed adequately’

• **Honesty is best:**
  – Check your biases and your language