

Recommendation Letters: The Who, The How, and The Unexpected



Presented by:
Kate Farthing, PharmD, BCPS
Mary Hess, PharmD, FASHP, FCCM, FCCP
Jason Schafer, PharmD, BCPS, AAHIVE



American Society of
Health-System Pharmacists
PHARMACY STUDENT FORUM

Presentation Objectives

At the end of this presentation, the participant should be able to:

- Outline how to optimally select individuals to prepare a letter of recommendation on your behalf
- Describe key elements to be included when asking for a letter of recommendation
- Describe how letters of recommendation may be evaluated and used by a manager or residency program director



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Letters of Recommendation Basics

- Typically 2 – 3 are required
 - ❖ Work is in developing the first one
 - ❖ Request only for completed applications
- Letter of Recommendation templates
 - ❖ Waiver may be included



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Purpose of a Reference



Excellent Knowledge

Great Clinical Skills

Mature Good natured

Speaks Effectively



Who Qualifies as a Reference?

<u>Individuals to Consider</u>	<u>Individuals Not to be Considered</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work Supervisor• Faculty advisor• Preceptor• Mentor• Student Organization Advisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family• Friends• Student colleagues• Clergy



Selection Strategies



Goal: Select the three that will provide you the best opportunity to achieve the desired position

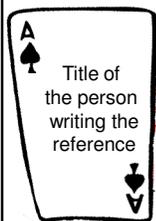


Factors to Consider Before Selecting

- How well does this person know me?
- Can they provide positive examples relevant to the position being applied for?
- Can they write a positive recommendation?
- Do they know the environment of my application?
- Do they have experience writing letters of recommendation?
- Can they be descriptive?
- Can they follow directions?
- Will they meet the deadline?



Selection Strategies



How important is the title of the person who writes my letter?

- Specific requirement
- Should I ask the Dean? ASHP Board of Director or President?



Selection Strategies



Paragraph 1 of every reference letter includes:

- 1 month vs years
- Role (advisor, preceptor, instructor)
- Employer (supervisor, pharmacist)
- Mentor (research, organizations)



Selection Strategies

A
♠ Do they know your strengths?
♥ Areas of development?

A valuable element in all letters include comments on strengths / development:

- Direct observation, evaluation
- Personal characteristics
- Knows your growth / development
- Knows what is still a work in progress



Selection Strategies

A
♠ Is there a specific example relevant to the position?
♥

• Give specific examples of

- ✓ skills
- ✓ critical thinking
- ✓ problem solving
- ✓ communication
- ✓ commitment to excellence



Selection Strategies

A
♠ Do they write or speak descriptively?
♥

Select one:

1. The student provided clinical service while on an internal medicine team.
2. The student was responsible for patient specific pharmacotherapy as a part of the internal medicine team.



Selection Strategies

A

♠

How well networked is the reference?

♥

♥

- What is their background?
 - ✓ Alma mater
 - ✓ Postgraduate training
 - ✓ Work history
 - ✓ Active in the profession



Selection Strategies

A

♠

Do they practice in an area you aspire to?

♥

♥

- What is their background?
 - ✓ Will you potentially be applying to places where they trained?
 - ✓ Do they serve on committees with individuals you might apply to?
 - ✓ What are their recommendations for training related to this specialty?



Additional Consideration: Is the same person writing for classmates applying to the same program?

Jane excelled in the classroom finishing in the top 5% of the class and has brought that knowledge into the practice setting.

Bob was engaged on rotations, always willing to go the extra mile and in my opinion has maximized his potential.

Beth has been a student leader since day 1 which may have contributed to her lower GPA; however, she is able to apply all of her knowledge & develops an excellent rapport with patients.



What will your selection strategy be?

- Consider one group of three for a PgY 1 program and a different set for employment
- What combination gives your application the most strength
- Follow the application directions



Communicating Your Reference Request



How do I ask for a reference letter?

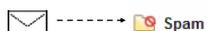
Accepted methods

- In person...but in a professional setting
- Formal phone conversation
- Formal email message*

Unacceptable Methods

- Informal email*
- Text messaging
- Social media
- By proxy

*Beware of spam filters!



What your reference needs from you

● Time

- ❖ It can take considerable time to write a (good) recommendation letter...and your reference may be very busy
- ❖ Communicate your requests early
- ❖ When? The earlier the better... but at least 1 month prior to the due date



What your reference needs from you

● The Details

- ❖ **HOW** the recommendation will be submitted
 - Electronically?
 - Provide the website or the email address of the recipient
 - As a formal letter?
 - Self addressed and stamped envelopes can be helpful
 - Accompanied by a recommendation form?
 - Provide electronically or as a hard copy for your reference
 - As a bundled application package?
 - Reference letters will be collected and submitted with your other application materials



What your reference needs from you

● The Details

- ❖ **WHERE** the recommendation is going
 - Provide the name of the institution
 - Provide the name, title, and address of the recipient
 - Provide the email address of the recipient if necessary
- ❖ **WHEN** it needs to get there
 - Sending an email reminder to your references as deadlines approach is acceptable



What your reference needs from you

● **More information about you...**

❖ **Be prepared to provide:**

- Your GPA
- An updated copy of your CV
 - Include any awards or honors that you have received
- Your motivation for pursuing the position
 - Why are you applying to this position?
 - Why are you applying to this institution?
- Copies of any projects that you completed with your reference



What if the answer is no?

● **A reference may say “no” for many reasons**

- ❖ A busy schedule
- ❖ Not capable of meeting the deadline
- ❖ Feels as though they do not know you well enough
- ❖ Unable to provide you with a completely positive recommendation



What if the answer is no?

● **Receiving a “no” is not the end of the world!**



What if the answer is no?

● **Tips:**

❖ **Do not pursue a reference if they say “no”**

- A less than positive letter might be worse than not having a letter from this individual at all

❖ **Be prepared in the case of a “no”**

- Make sure to think of at least one back-up person to provide a letter of reference if necessary



The Program’s Viewpoint

...thanks for the letter!



What is a program looking for?

● **Did the letter meet the requirements outlined in the application?**

- ❖ Recommendation form or free standing letter?

● **Does the letter mention qualities we believe are essential?**

● **What is the letter saying?**



The impact of a recommendation

- Dependent on the number of positions available
- Positive recommendation
- Neutral recommendation
- Negative recommendation



Do programs call references?

Does the name of the writer matter?



How is this letter received?

Setting the stage: Clerkship preceptor

Special assets – highly motivated, bright, enthusiastic, eager to learn, quick to adapt.

No weakness identified – Susie tends to be quiet but is self assured and assertive. Highly recommend the applicant.

“It’s unfortunate that we do not have a position for Susie when she finishes her Pharm.D program. She possesses all the qualities we look for in a clinical staff pharmacist. I thoroughly enjoyed her rotation with me and the time she spent in our department with other preceptors.”



How is this letter received?

Setting the stage: Supervisor

I know Susie very well – she is hard working and dedicated to pharmacy.

Weaknesses – she is quiet and takes more time to catch on than her peers.

Overall, recommended with some reservation and no supporting letter or other information provided.



How is this letter received?

Setting the stage: Clinical preceptor

“In over 25 years of teaching and clinical research, I have known other students with talent equivalent to Jack. Many of them lack his good nature and humility, and few demonstrate the genuine intellectual curiosity that Jack exhibits time and again. He is likable, enthusiastic and trustworthy. I am very confident that Jack will be an eager and able resident. I highly recommend him to you without reservation.”



How is this letter received?

Setting the stage: Clinical preceptor

1 month experience, I know Jack fairly well.

“I spent a total of three weeks with Jack, and must admit that I only know him fairly well and have typically known previous applicants better.”



Letters from others

- Supervisor and friend, “ I have had the pleasure to observe Susie working in my department as a pharmacy technician prior to her acceptance to pharmacy school and during school breaks; however, as a family friend, I have known her for more than 25 years.”
- Soccer coach and friend (11 years), “Jack is a natural leader. Even without family support in high school and college, he has excelled. Jack is very mature and a self starter. He will be an asset from day 1.”



Closing Comments

- Individualize your reference selection for a specific position
- Make sure the person providing the reference knows enough about you
- Make the request clearly and set expectations
- Offer to discuss the intended content, provide examples or characteristics to include in the letter or recommendation form