GUIDE TWO

Letters of Recommendation

Johns Hopkins University
Office of Pre-Professional Programs and Advising

Office of Pre-Professional Programs and Advising
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Part I: Requesting letters of recommendation

How many letters of recommendation do I need and from whom?
Letters of recommendation (also known as “letters of evaluation”) are a critical part of the health professions application process. Medical schools value the perspectives of people who have observed an applicant’s work and can speak to the applicant’s abilities and personality. Johns Hopkins University applicants to medical, dental, and other health professions schools are supported by letters of recommendation obtained from faculty, administrators, and other professionals from both inside and outside of the university.

Medical schools vary in their requirements for letters of recommendation, but the following are generally suggested:

• two letters from faculty who have taught you in sciences or engineering
• one letter from faculty who has taught you in humanities or social sciences
• one to three letters from outside of the classroom, such as a research PI, athletic coach, employer or supervisor, volunteer coordinator, etc.

You will want letters of recommendation from people who know you well and can provide substantial information and examples on why you are a good candidate for health professions school. In choosing between someone who taught you in a small class versus someone with a famous name or title but who is unable to write a personal letter, choose the former.

How should I ask for letters of recommendation?
Since there is no one single way in which to ask for a letter of recommendation, you will need to use your best judgment in considering the recommender, your relationship with him/her, and the environment. For example, a PI you see on a regular basis and with whom you work closely will likely warrant an in-person request. With faculty, however, you might need to send an email, because it is not likely you will want to ask for a letter of rec during office hours (when other students are around) or after class (when a professor might be rushed).

We suggest you share the following materials with your recommenders to best prepare them for writing a strong letter on your behalf:

• resume
• transcript (optional)
• graded papers that you have written for the instructor (if applicable)
• an application essay (if applicable)
• an introductory email could include:
  • why you want to be a physician/dentist/other health professional
  • skills, abilities, or knowledge (i.e., competencies) that you want to share (be humble!)

Give the recommender the option of saying “no.” Your goal is to secure strong and supportive letters. If a person is uncomfortable writing for you or does not have enough time, it is likely that the result will be a short and weak letter. If they decline, that’s okay! Remember to be gracious even if you are told no.
is better to have someone speak honestly with you at the start, so that you can work to find another evaluator who will be more enthusiastic about your application.

Give your recommenders plenty of advance notice so they have sufficient time (i.e., a minimum of 4 weeks’ notice) to write a strong letter of rec. When applying to medical/dental schools, please ask your recommenders to complete their letters of recommendation by mid-June of your application year.

The Association of American Medical Colleges has developed a comprehensive document titled “Guidelines for Writing a Letter of Evaluation for a Medical School Applicant” that we encourage you to share with all of your letter writers.

Part II: How to save or store letters of recommendation

The process of using veCollect for storing individual letters of recommendation is only available for pre-medical and pre-dental applicants. When you apply to medical or dental school, Pre-Professional Advising will access your individual letters of recommendation through veCollect, attach them to the end of your Committee Letter, and upload all of the letters as one PDF to the primary application service(s) to which you apply.

veCollect instructions are on the Pre-Professional Advising website, under the Advising Guides link.

How does my Committee Letter factor into all of this?
Committee Letters are written in the spring and summer by the Pre-Professional Advising Office and are uploaded to medical and dental schools beginning in July.

- When applying, you will indicate in the primary application(s) that you are receiving a Committee Letter from Johns Hopkins University. In turn, Pre-Professional Advising will access your individual letters of recommendation through veCollect, attach them to the end of your Committee Letter, and upload all of the letters as one PDF to the primary application service(s) to which you apply.

- Directions for opening and managing a veCollect account are located on the Pre-Professional Advising Guides website.
Guide Two: Letters of Recommendation

Part III: Frequently Asked Questions

What deadline should I give my recommenders for writing their letters?
You should build a potential list of recommenders the fall before the application cycle opens. Most students begin approaching recommenders in the late winter to early spring (January to April), to gain the greatest benefits from developing rapport and increasing longevity of classroom interaction, research, or other projects and endeavors. Please ask your recommenders to complete their letters by mid-June of your application year.

Do letters of recommendation need to be submitted before my primary application?
No. In fact, do NOT delay your primary application in an effort to simultaneously submit your application and letters of rec. Submit your application as early as possible, even if your letters of recommendation and Committee Letter have not yet been submitted.

What should I do if I am having trouble getting one of my recommenders to submit his/her letter?
Sometimes it is helpful to provide a “gentle reminder” to a writer who has not yet submitted a letter by mid or late June of your application year. If it is getting late into the summer and the letter has not been written, you can try calling the office in which your recommender works and asking someone on staff to assist you in communicating with the writer.

As a reapplicant, can I use the same letters from my previous application cycle?
It’s always good to get at least one new letter when you are a reapplicant. We recommend you speak to an advisor about your letters if you are reapplying, to determine whether you should request updated letters and/or add new evaluators, and to determine if you are still eligible for a Committee Letter.

Professionalism
All applicants are expected to operate with professionalism throughout the medical school application process. This includes exercising patience while waiting for your letters to be written, thanking your recommenders for their support, and notifying your recommenders when you have decided upon a medical or dental school to attend.

In Closing
As you embark on your pre-med/pre-health path, it is important to reflect on why you want a career in medicine or dentistry, what your strengths are as an applicant, and what timeline you have set for applying. We encourage you to seek input from your advisors to devise a plan that is appropriate for your emerging academic and professional goals. For more information, please email preprofessional@jhu.edu.