

Effective Letters of Support

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SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS**



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Financial Disclosures

None to report



Learning Objectives

Discuss the **key elements and their purposes** in an effective letter of support

Differentiate how and when to **draft letters** of support using **voice and tone**

Use evidence on **word choice** to choose statements that reflect intended meaning, attending to inference and unintentional bias



Global Letter Format

1. Purpose of letter
2. Who I am (signatory), qualifications to comment (expertise, position)
3. Specific content
5. Personal plea on behalf of wonderful mentee
6. Closing



Bookends: Purpose, Closing of Letter

Purpose of letter

Be specific as to why you are writing

Start with your conclusion

Closing—final ask

Directly state the request, e.g., it is my hope that you will fund this grant... or....I hope you will strongly consider Dr. X who I suspect will be on your leadership team in just a few short years

Optional, helpful, therefore effective

Use expected **signal words**, e.g. outstanding, excellent, highest recommendation, top 5%



Why should you listen to me?

Who I am (signatory): qualification to write, expertise in the field, **specific** examples

I am an Associate Professor of Emergency Medicine and serve as the Assistant Medical Director for our Emergency Department here at University medical center. I have been on the faculty for 8 years and in my leadership role for 2 years reporting directly to both our Medical Director and our Chair. I have led our current initiative to redesign our triage system and have worked with our faculty, residents and administrators to reach evidence-based consensus on the new practices with metrics of safety and efficiency.



Why should you listen to me?

Who I am (signatory): qualification to write, expertise in the field, **specific** examples

I'm a Professor of X with joint appointments in Y and Z. I am the PI of an NIH funded grant on X, and have published in this area for a decade. Since 2008 I have served on the study section that covers this field.

How well I know the person:

I have known Jane for five years. Since then we attended two hour weekly meetings on mentored research and career development. I served as Jane's primary mentor in our department since 2009. We co-authored a recent peer-reviewed manuscript together published in *JAMA*.



Specific Content: Meat and Potatoes

Answer “**so what**” question—reaching out in a voice not possible in an application

Assuage concerns over controversies, address flaws that might need to be reframed

Be strategic: *DRAFT* the sections and issues you want addressed by each letter, all letters

E.g. Promotion areas research, education



Content Aligned with Purpose

Project proposal: address criteria for project;
e.g. innovation, impact

Mentoring plan: your mentor role, track record

Financial/in kind support: detail *all* resources
pledged

Consultancy: scope of work, time commitment

Awards: eligibility, fit



Content Aligned with Purpose

Faculty position: address criteria for position; e.g. clinical skills, teaching evaluations, research accomplishments, citizenship, community service, leadership skills, etc. with **specific examples**

...clinical care is outstanding with superb procedural skills, especially with difficult intubations and use of the fiberoptic bronchoscope

...teaching evaluations in the top 10% of our faculty

...chairing an important triage redesign task force for our hospital

Salary support or financial support through grants: detail *all* resources brought in either for leadership positions, teaching, or grants (research or service).

Leadership: every aspect of academic medicine requires leadership

→ highlight this!



Personal Plea & Final Ask

Personal plea on behalf of wonderful mentee or colleague, resident/fellow; use **details** that illustrate personal regard

“On a personal note...”

Describe the person in your own, glowing terms

Be as warm as is reasonable, say that you care

Be specific about your commitment to this person's career and why



In Between the Lines: Voicing & Tone

In *YOUR DRAFT*, use the **signatory's voice** as much as possible

Details illustrate closeness, avoid generalities

Begin with formality: full/formal name, end with first name (style, choice)

Be **strong**—signatory may not make changes and you end up with a great letter



Word Choice and Connotation

Recommendation letters could cost women jobs, promotions. Nov 9, 2010, Jessica Stark

<http://www.physorg.com/news/2010-11-letters-women-jobs.html>

Rice University study > 600 letters

Communal terms used for female candidates

Agentic terms used for male candidates



Reinforcing Stereotypes

Communal

Affectionate
Helpful
Kind
Sympathetic
Nurturing
Tactful
Agreeable
Helps others
Takes direction well
Maintains relationships

Agentic

Confident
Aggressive
Ambitious
Dominant
Forceful
Independent
Outspoken
Intellectual
Speaks assertively
Influences others
Initiates tasks

The conundrum of gender bias

Agentic words preferred generically,
but when associated with men

Conflicting expectations for
leadership (dominant, agentic) and
women (supportive, communal)

Communal words may be fine or
even desired for women

Fine line, nuanced

Emphasize accomplishments with
examples, not adjectives



Modifiers – Assurance or Doubt?

*“He is already an established leader” vs.
“She might make a good leader”*

Consider negative interpretations of your perspectives

Managing family responsibilities

Stays late and comes in early, works around the clock

Always volunteers to lecture

Resident’s choice for a sympathetic ear



Example Letters of Support

Using our Good and Bad letter excerpts,

What is *ENcouraging* about the applicant?

What is *DIScouraging* about the applicant?



To the Review Committee:

Herein is my letter of support for Dr. Pat Smith's application for a K12 award. I have known Pat for 1.5 years as Dr. Jackson's senior research technician. She switched fields from biochemistry to particle physics to help guide Joe's animal projects on particulate disorders. She learned a great deal about particle physics and working with transgenic mice since joining Joe's lab in 2006. She is far afield from her previous training and background. Thus, I give her a lot of credit for switching from biochemistry to particle physics.



To the Review Committee, cont.:

Pat has a goal of one day assuming an independent research grant, while still operating in Dr. Jackson's laboratory. Obtaining more experience investigating the role of particles in physics will allow Pat to learn new skills and gain preliminary data for a career development award. While her career track has taken many turns beyond her post-doc, she seems genuinely committed to working in this field. Thus, while she is beyond the post-doc stage, and not quite independent, she would truly benefit from this award.



Dr. Smith has exceptional technical training.

Her responsibilities to her family have required that she take some detours in her career path, but she has shown that she can persevere through a number of personal and professional setbacks that would discourage most individuals who were not as dedicated to pursuing a career in academic research. She has developed an impressive mastery of the English language, both in her speaking and in her writing, and has adapted to a new culture both in her personal life and within our scientific community. Dr. Smith is ready to begin taking the steps toward developing an independent research program, and I strongly encourage you to help her do so with this Junior Faculty Award mechanism.



Dr. Smith's work has been recognized externally as excellent. She gave an...

...invited presentation to the U.S. Asthma and Allergy Committee and co-authored the Committee's evidence report on the exacerbation of asthma in those with food allergies in 2016. She received competitive travel awards from external and intramural sources to present her work nationally over the past 3 years at the AAAIS Sessions and the GF Conference. Importantly, she has received intramural and foundation funding for an ongoing pilot clinical research study designed to evaluate worsening of atopic dermatitis in persons with asthma and allergies (from three programs). That work has led directly to the study described in her present proposal.



In summary,...

..., Dr. Smith is an ideal and compelling candidate for the AAA Junior Faculty Award. She embodies the combination of qualities that will make her successful as she continues with her academic career. I recommend her with the highest enthusiasm. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.



To the Mentoring Award Committee:

Dr. Beth Ward's consummate mentorship around work-life balance deserves mention. A key challenge faced by junior faculty is achieving work-life balance. Dr. Ward has by been referred to by many junior faculty members as a friend, big sister, mom, and therapist. While research mentorship is widespread across the institution, it is more difficult for clinical faculty to find mentors who can help them navigate the demands of high volume clinical practice while maintaining the energy and time to focus on important goals outside of work. Achieving a balance between professional and personal life can be facilitated by a kind and caring mentor who understands the complexity of clinical and administrative duties and is creative in suggesting options. In this role, Dr. Ward is unmatched at University of XX.



To the Mentoring Award Committee:

...Dr. Ward has by been referred to by many junior faculty members as a ~~friend, big sister, mom, and therapist~~ **an expert in helping faculty clarify their goals and view their careers in a long term perspective that can shed light on challenging decisions..** While research-oriented mentorship is widespread across the institution, it is more difficult for clinical faculty to find mentors who can help them navigate the demands of high volume clinical practice while maintaining the energy and time to focus on important goals outside of work. Achieving a balance between professional and personal life can be facilitated by an ~~kind~~ **experienced and caring thoughtful mentor like Dr. Ward** who understands the complexity of clinical and administrative duties and is creative in suggesting options. **Dr. Ward has a remarkable approach to problem solving and encourages faculty to have conversations with key personal stakeholders to better understand how the integration of work and life are perceived by important family, friends and colleagues. Dr. Ward then coaches faculty in devising their own experiments that can lead to significant benefits to work-life integration.** In this **critically important** role, Dr. **Ward's skills** are ~~is~~ unmatched at X.



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**Training available online and in
person, at our sites or yours**

