

# College of Medicine MD Student Personal Letter Guide

*The Office of Career Advising and Mentorship (OCAM) plays an important role in preparing students for the residency match process. When medical students start applying to the Canadian Resident Matching Service (CaRMS) to begin the application process, they need to create several personal letters. Your personal letter discusses the reasons why you have chosen a particular training program. Each program has preferences regarding what the personal letter should contain. Check the individual program descriptions at [carms.ca](https://carms.ca).*

## Content

- Create a tailored personal letter based on the specific requirements of each program you apply to.
- Your personal letter should emphasize your competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities), talents, experience and accomplishments that make you the ideal candidate for that program.
- Use variety in your sentence structure and use transition/linking words, to connect one idea to the next.
- Review your personal letter for spelling and grammatical errors and consider having someone at OCAM review your residency application documents; book in for a CaRMS document review appointment.
- Read CaRMS program descriptions carefully for personal letter instructions. While some say only “a personal letter is required”, others have very specific word counts or questions for you to answer.
- Unless specified otherwise, personal letters should always address the “3 whys” – “why this specialty”, “why you”, and “why this program”.

## Organization/Layout

- Keep your personal letter to the length specified by the program requirements; if none are given, aim for 1 to 1½ pages and single spaced.
- Your letter should include an introductory paragraph, two main body paragraphs and a closing paragraph.
- Address your personal letter to “Dr. [Program Director] and members of the Selection Committee”.

## Format/Design

- Personal letters are uploaded into a web form in the CaRMS portal, so don’t worry about font size or letterhead.

## Social Media

- Review all your social media accounts and privacy settings and remove anything that reflects poorly on you or others even if you are private.
- Consider creating a LinkedIn profile which allows you to upload your CV content and connect with medical professionals locally and around the world.
- For tips on how to build a professional student LinkedIn profile check out the Leverage LinkedIn at [students.usask.ca/articles/linkedin.php](https://students.usask.ca/articles/linkedin.php)

# Checklist



## Know Yourself and Your Audience

- ☐ Start writing your Personal Letter early as a strong personal letter takes a lot of time to create.
- ☐ Before you begin, review the personal letter requirements for each program you’re applying to, as many programs have specific guidelines (e.g., word count maximums, guidelines on use of AI, etc).
- ☐ Practice articulating your values, knowledge, skills, abilities and interests as they relate to residency application documents.
- ☐ Conduct sufficient research on the prospective program. For example: Talk to current or former residents, review program descriptions on the CaRMS website, visit the program’s website, and learn about each program’s unique curricular elements or research interests.

## Production and Format

- ☐ Ensure your personal letter meets the specified word count.
- ☐ Grab the reader’s attention by explaining why their program or specialty appeals to you in the first paragraph. Consider telling personal or academic or clinical experiences.
- ☐ In the second paragraph, communicate your strengths and competencies as they relate to the specialty and program.
- ☐ In the final paragraph, discuss unique elements of this particular program that appeal to you.
- ☐ Review your document for spelling and grammar errors
- ☐ Be concise and to the point in your personal letter.
- ☐ If applicable, answer all the program’s personal letter prompt questions.
- ☐ Have a friend, family member, or mentor review the document for spelling/ grammar errors and content.
- ☐ Create an original letter for each program rather than sending a mass-produced copy.
- ☐ Double-checked that the personal letter uploaded to each program has been assigned to the correct one.
- ☐ Read your letter out loud to check if it flows smoothly. If it doesn’t, consider making some adjustments.

## Next Steps

- ☐ Revisit your applications several times within the [carms.ca](https://carms.ca) platform to ensure your submissions are complete.
- ☐ Book an appointment with the OCAM to review your documents.
- ☐ Have your personal letters reviewed by the Writing Help Desk at the USask Library and/or by family and friends and/or in an optional personal letter review appointment with our office.
- ☐ Check out past students’ personal letters here:  
[docs.google.com/document/d/1DusEDbEYPKkUs-zfo2p28QzAGAYm4-RH8PjZwTrQZlc/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DusEDbEYPKkUs-zfo2p28QzAGAYm4-RH8PjZwTrQZlc/edit)

Resource: CaRMS program descriptions are publicly available at [carms.ca](https://carms.ca).

## Components of a Residency Application

There are several documents that make up a residency application, but not all documents are required for all programs or matches. Always consult the program descriptions for specific requirements available at [carms.ca](http://carms.ca). You should review these descriptions regularly to make sure you are aware of the latest requirements, as modifications are made throughout the year. These document types may be required in your applications to programs:

- College of Medicine Transcript
- Medical Student Performance Record (MSPR)
- CV
- Personal Letters (inline)
- Letters of Reference
- Proof of citizenship (notarized or certified)
- Photo (JPEG max. 2MBs)
- Other exams such as Casper and FMProC

AAMC's Careers in Medicine® (2016) notes that the number of residency programs to which you should apply is specific to your situation and comprised of:

- the content of your application (i.e., your competitiveness),
- the competitiveness of the specialty you're pursuing,
- the competitiveness of the programs you're pursuing,
- your geographic restrictions, and
- any other constraints.

The more competitive the specialty and programs and the more constrained you are by location and other factors, the more programs you'll need to apply to for a successful match. Your ultimate goal: identifying enough programs you're willing to attend that, considering your specific situation, will land you a residency spot.

The most commonly reviewed file elements are the completeness of your documents and your application, the content of your LORs, and how you've aligned and conveyed your interest in the specific discipline or program.

## Writing Content

The **first paragraph** of the personal letter should align you with the prospective program. Answer the following questions to convince the program director or selection committee that they should keep reading.

1. What inspired you to apply to this program? (Besides the fact that they have residency seats! Consider leading with curricular or educational elements, then you can include what attracts you about the location.)
2. What makes your skill set, personality and background an asset to the program or profession? How are you a unique, well-suited candidate? Why are you a good fit at this program?
3. In what way could you contribute to this specific programs' goals? Research their disciplinary innovations, mission, vision and values.

In the **second paragraph** or the body of the personal letter, communicate your competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities) and experiences as they relate to the residency position. Choose only the most relevant highlights from your CV to demonstrate your capabilities and don't be afraid to utilize a cross-section of your experiences in medicine.

In the **concluding paragraphs**, focus on your soft skills as a professional. What values do you bring to the program or discipline?

## Proofread and Critique Your Letter

In addition to accessing the OCAM's CV and Personal Letter review services, have multiple people review your letters. Consider asking a recent MD graduate or your Synergy mentor to review your letters.

Review your document for spelling and grammatical errors.

Revisit the program description on [carms.ca](http://carms.ca) to ensure you follow each program's directions for what to include in the letter.

Be concise in your letter.

Make sure your letter is within the specified word count if the program provides one.

## Family Medicine sample

### Prompt from Saskatchewan Family Medicine program

A personal letter describing yourself and your career interest is required. Please address the personal letter to the overall program “Dr. Sheila Smith and Selection Committee” and NOT to each site. Submit the same personal letter to each site you are applying to.

Your letter must include your motivations for applying to Family Medicine and selecting the University of Saskatchewan for training. Please also reflect on qualities that are critical to being a Family Physician and/or a rural Family Physician and strengths that you will contribute to our program.

[www.carms.ca/match/r-1-main-residency-match/program-descriptions/](http://www.carms.ca/match/r-1-main-residency-match/program-descriptions/)

Dear Dr. Program Director and members of the Selection Committee,

A family physician has the privilege of getting to know patients of all ages, over a long period of time, not only in terms of their whole body, but as part of their personal history, family, community, and society. The aspects of holism and the continuity of care involved in Family Medicine, as well as the fit with my experiences and personality, are what lead me to a passion for general practice. Family medicine has been my specialty of choice since before medical school. I became involved with Saskatoon’s student-run clinic, Student Wellness Initiative Toward Community Health (SWITCH), and other social justice educational initiatives prior to being admitted to medicine. I became passionate about societal health, and first consciously experienced the power of hearing people’s stories.

While I am pursuing a residency position in Saskatchewan, I am drawn to the benefits of a smaller program with the resources of a larger centre. For example, Regina residents spend time outside of the clinic with hospitalists, manage Family Medicine inpatients, and spend time at Four Directions Health Centre. Other regional sites such as Prince Albert offer significant obstetrical experience as well as the challenges of working in a rural emergency setting. In my clerkship experiences at the University of Saskatchewan, I have consistently found the program to be supportive of my needs as a learner as well as my well-being.

I was inspired to pursue a career in medicine because of the unique setting physicians build relationships with their patients in. I look forward to learning to deal with the specific challenges of family medicine’s complexity, such as balancing multiple concerns while addressing pressing issues and maintaining appropriate boundaries while fostering fulfilling relationships. While I have also considered a career in psychiatry, as my elective selections would indicate, my interest in the discipline are best served through a career in family medicine.

In addition to its holism, the flexibility and portability of family medicine excites me. My educational experiences have shown me the appeal of rural, remote/northern, and urban inner city opportunities. My goal is to develop the skill set to practice full-service family medicine which includes inpatient management, emergency medicine, care of the elderly, minor procedures, obstetrics, and possibly some addictions medicine.

The diversity of family medicine encompasses my various special interests in inner city health, Indigenous Health, global health, and geriatrics. My appreciation for societal health was fostered through my extensive involvement as a shift supervisor and board member (among other roles) at Saskatoon’s student-run clinic, SWITCH. SWITCH taught me about

humanity’s dignity, strength, and oppression. The insights I gained in this setting motivated me to work collaboratively to face poverty, societal barriers to health and addictions, and to promote Indigenous Health and organizational growth. My two-month externship in La Ronge after second year Medicine reinforced those interests and my passion for family medicine. I experienced them in an exciting northern, remote, team-based, and hands-on setting.

For clerkship, I chose to be a part of the small clerkship program in Prince Albert. Working with generalist specialists and full-service family doctors, I experienced the advantages of one-on-one, self-directed and very hands-on learning in Saskatchewan’s “gateway to the North.” This has taught me adaptability, independence, and how to take advantage of learning opportunities while recognizing my limitations and finding support.

Besides my relevant experience and ties to Saskatchewan, I offer desirable qualities in both a future resident and family doctor. I am thorough, organized, and detail-oriented; I take extensive notes, ask lots of questions, and have been involved with various committees and conference planning. My personality is such that I am contemplative and engage in continuous reflection on the details to find their overall significance demonstrated by my devoted involvement in SWITCH and various committees which also helped to refine my communication skills. Being open to listening to patients and colleagues is one of the most important qualities a physician can embody and is very important to me.

Through experience, I intend to improve my clinical confidence, comfort level with conflict, and assertiveness. I strive for balance and self-awareness through my ready sense of humour and activities such as yoga, running, baking, cooking, reading, and singing. I recognize the importance of my social support from my family, friends, partners, and a strong peer group.

I am confident that family medicine will help me fulfill my career and life aspirations. My passion, personality and experiences make me a strong candidate for the Regina-based family medicine residency program.

Thank you for your consideration.

*Candace Clerk*

Sincerely,  
Candace Clerk

## Psychiatry sample

## Prompt from Saskatchewan Psychiatry program

A personal letter is required. It should include information on academic awards received, work history, electives in undergraduate years, motivation for choosing psychiatry, activities and interests that will complement a career choice in psychiatry. If there are any gaps in your medical education, this should be addressed.

[www.carms.ca/match/r-1-main-residency-match/program-descriptions/](http://www.carms.ca/match/r-1-main-residency-match/program-descriptions/)

Dear Dr. Program Director and members of the Selection Committee:

A psychiatrist has the privilege of knowing a patient's fundamental experiences and thoughts and integrates this information with her to actually think differently and experience improved mental health. I am passionate about psychiatry as it fits my interests, experiences, and personality well. Your program appeals to me particularly due to its small size and its multifaceted training. The small size allows for hands-on work with patients while being supported academically in an excellent preceptor to resident ratio. I appreciate that the program combines experiences in the Emergency Department, various psychotherapy modalities, inpatient psychiatry and community psychiatry (both general and in various subspecialties), including the chance to work with underserved populations, such as at Westside Community Clinic, the Calder Centre, the Regional Psychiatric Centre and visiting rural/northern clinics.

Growing up in rural Saskatchewan, I saw how stigmatization of mental health issues and a lack of community resources really hurt people. I chose to pursue medicine as a career because of the unique ways that a physician, specifically a psychiatrist, can impact the lives of communities. I love the holism and complexity of psychiatry and I look forward to learning to deal with the specific challenges of its complexity, such as working with local resources to support patients psychosocially and maintaining appropriate boundaries while fostering fulfilling relationships.

During my undergraduate experience and time in medical school, I was heavily involved in SWITCH, Saskatoon's student-run inner city clinic, as a social and medical volunteer then board chair, among other roles. Seeing the relationship between clients' mental health challenges and social circumstances really affected me. I have been privileged with the chance to listen to clients' stories and to see the positive impact of social supports, counseling and occasionally psychiatric medications on clients' situations. SWITCH has also helped me see the world through the lens of the social determinants of health. My Dean's Summer Research Project, after first year medical school, focused on community service-learning with underserved populations. Mental health remains a challenge in Western society, and I would love to dedicate my life to advancing it. While my work history is certainly not extensive, working at a law office in university summers with will/estate, criminal and family law clients showed me how societal structures and the people who work within them can impact mental health.

My clerkship rotations and electives bolstered my interest in psychiatry, while my electives in family medicine helped me to understand the patient as a whole person. On

my core psychiatric rotation, I enjoyed a well-rounded psychiatry practice by working with community psychiatrists to see the patients they've known for years, plus inpatient psychiatry for the most acutely ill and consults in the Emergency Department for those in crisis. I enjoyed the challenge of quickly establishing rapport and navigating community resources to best work with a patient.

On my elective rotation in addictions medicine in downtown eastside Vancouver, I witnessed the pathophysiology of addiction and how a patient's often difficult background fits into that. As a psychiatrist, I think I would enjoy the challenge of having a satellite clinic in the inner city with a similar population. I also spent elective time with some geriatric psychiatrists in Calgary, where I enjoyed hearing seniors' stories and participating in interdisciplinary assessments to optimize seniors' quality of life. With Canada's aging population, teams like these are also crucial for societal health. My core and elective clerkship rotations showed me the importance of various domains of psychiatry.

I have worked to strengthen attributes that make an effective psychiatrist. My work with the Geriatric Interest Group as a co-chair and the Aboriginal, Rural and Remote Health Group as a treasurer, in addition my work in my administrative and direct service-providing roles at SWITCH, have taught me how to collaborate with various disciplines, colleagues, administrators and clients. These same experiences, plus those in clerkship rotations, honed my speaking and listening skills. Collaboration and communication are two of the most crucial skills required for a career in psychiatry.

Through experience, I intend to improve my clinical confidence, comfort level with conflict, and assertiveness. I recognize the importance of my own social support from my family, partner, and a strong peer group. I strive for balance and self-awareness and value spending time immersed in activities such as yoga, running, and reading. As a homegrown student who intends to practice in Saskatchewan, I would relish the opportunity to complete my training at home, starting my work to improve Saskatchewan's mental health.

Thank you for your consideration.

*Candace Clerk*

Sincerely,  
Candace Clerk

## Orthopedics sample

### Prompt from Saskatchewan Orthopedic Surgery program

A personal letter is encouraged. Please describe your reasons for wanting to do a residency in orthopedic surgery in two paragraphs or less (approx. 300 or less).

In a separate paragraph please outline why you are applying to the University of Saskatchewan Orthopedic Surgery Residency Training Program

[www.carms.ca/match/r-1-main-residency-match/program-descriptions/](http://www.carms.ca/match/r-1-main-residency-match/program-descriptions/)

Dear Dr. Program Director and members of the Selection Committee:

I have been interested in orthopedics since working with my own orthopedic surgeon and physiotherapist to recover my jump after tearing my ACL playing university basketball. My personality and experience suit the specialty. Preceptors have commented on my quick learning, efficient communication, and procedural skills. My extensive basketball coaching experience has taught me how to motivate and collaborate. Dr. Rodney and I investigated how the team at Saskatchewan's Hip and Knee pathway decreased wait times, selected patients for surgery and rehabilitated patients, and published our findings in the Canadian Journal of Surgery.

Orthopedics is a diverse and rewarding field. The musculoskeletal system is crucial to people's participation in the world. I enjoy the variety of work settings, from ambulatory care to the office to the operating room. I find it very rewarding to work with patients of all ages; from a child with a humerus fracture from falling off a playground, to an athlete with a meniscal tear, to an elder who can become physically active again with her "bionic knee". As a hands-on learner who has built model trains since age four, I love seeing immediate results in a range of patients. I see myself in a general orthopedics practice in Saskatchewan, with some research and teaching.

The Saskatoon orthopedics program appeals to me for its generalist skillset and small size. During my selective and elective rotations, I really enjoyed the friendly, tight-knit residency community. Fewer residents means each resident has the opportunity for more procedures. While away on out-of-province electives, I noticed the Saskatoon residents had much more and earlier hands-on learning. Saskatoon is my hometown. I love this city for its friendliness, good food, and river running trails. My family and partner live here, and I would love to stay here for residency and practice.

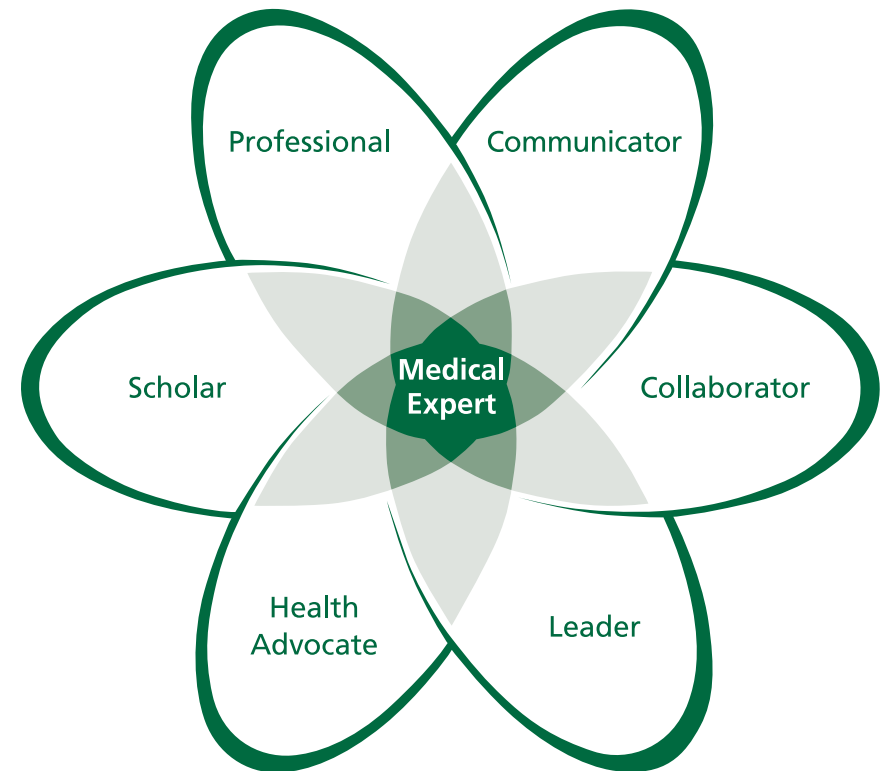
Thank you for your consideration.

*Candace Clerk*

Sincerely,  
Candace Clerk

## CanMEDS Framework

CanMEDS is a framework that identifies and describes the abilities physicians require to effectively meet the health care needs of the people they serve. These abilities are grouped thematically under seven roles. A competent physician seamlessly integrates the competencies of all seven CanMEDS Roles. It is important to integrate the CanMEDS language into your residency application documents to emphasize your competencies in these areas.



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## Medical Expert **Action Words**

### Leader

Accelerated	Contracted	Facilitated	Instituted	Presided	Reviewed
Achieved	Decided	Governed	Lead	Prioritized	Scheduled
Administered	Delegated	Harmonized	Motivated	Produced	Spearheaded
Appointed	Designated	Hired	Named	Recommended	Strengthened
Assigned	Directed	Implemented	Negotiated	Reconciled	Supervised
Chaired	Executed	Improved	Oversaw	Reorganized	
Conducted	Evaluated	Initiated	Planned	Reported	

### Communicator

Addressed	Conferred	Documented	Inspired	Published	Suggested
Aided	Consulted	Drafted	Interpreted	Read	Summarized
Advised	Contributed	Edited	Interviewed	Recruited	Talked
Appraised	Convinced	Enlisted	Mediated	Represented	Translated
Arranged	Corresponded	Explained	Merged	Reported	Unified
Authored	Counselled	Expressed	Moderated	Resolved	Updated
Briefed	Debated	Formulated	Printed	Rewrote	Verbalized
Clarified	Directed	Influenced	Promoted	Spoke	Wrote

### Scholar

Analyzed	Critiqued	Extrapolated	Located	Solved	Uncovered
Calculated	Diagnosed	Gathered	Monitored	Studied	Verified
Catalogued	Discovered	Identified	Observed	Summarized	
Collected	Evaluated	Inspected	Organized	Surveyed	
Compared	Examined	Interpreted	Proved	Synthesized	
Conducted	Explored	Interviewed	Researched	Tabulated	
Correlated	Extracted	Investigated	Reviewed	Tested	

### Professional

Achieved	Expanded	Provided	Risked	Succeeded	Utilized
Adapted	Furnished	Raised	Saved	Supported	Widened
Attained	Increased	Recommended	Simplified	Surpassed	Won
Completed	Introduced	Reduced	Solved	Transferred	
Contributed	Multiplied	Restored	Streamlined	Troubleshoot	
Decreased	Opened	Revamped	Strengthened	Uncovered	
Eliminated	Pioneered	Revised	Structured	Unified	
Established	Proposed	Revitalized	Submitted	Upgraded	

### Health Advocate

Advised	Clarified	Educated	Helped	Related	Tutored
Advocated	Coached	Empathized	Intervened	Represented	Volunteered
Aided	Communicated	Encouraged	Mentored	Saved	
Assessed	Coordinated	Expedited	Motivated	Served	
Assisted	Counselled	Facilitated	Provided	Suggested	
Attended	Delivered	Familiarized	Referred	Supported	
Cared	Diagnosed	Guided	Rehabilitated	Trained	

### Collaborator

Allied	Cooperated	Implemented	Managed	Resolved	Transitioned
Banded	Demonstrated	Interdisciplinary	Negotiated	Shared	Understood
Collaborated	Engaged	Joined	Participated	Teamed	
Combined	Established	Maintained	Respected	Transferred	

## Canadian Resident Matching Service (CaRMS) Timeline

The Canadian Resident Matching Service (CaRMS) is a national, independent, not-for-profit, fee-for-service organization that provides a fair, objective and transparent application and matching service for medical training throughout Canada. They have matched 70,000+ medical students to available residency training positions.

CaRMS administers the electronic process that matches medical students and residents with residency programs throughout the country.

**SEP**

**CARMS ONLINE OPENS FOR APPLICANTS**

**OCT**

■ **PROGRAM SELECTION OPENS**  
■ **CAN START ASSIGNING DOCUMENTS TO PROGRAM**

**NOV**

**MSPR, TRANSCRIPT MILESTONE**

**NOV**

**MAIL LETTER OF REFERENCE MILESTONE**

**NOV**

**APPLICATION AND DOCUMENT SUBMISSION DEADLINE**

**JAN**

to

**FEB**

**INTERVIEW PERIOD**

**FEB**

**APPLICANT RANK ORDER LIST DEADLINE**

**MAR**

**MATCH DAY**

### CaRMS help desk

help@carms.ca

1-877-227-6742

Always consult [carms.ca](https://carms.ca) for the most up-to-date match timelines, as they are time sensitive and may change from year to year.

# Transition/Linking Words

Transition/Linking Words help guide the reader to understand the direction of your thought, from one significant idea to the next.

<b>Addition/Add information</b> actually additionally again along with also alternatively another and as a matter of fact as well as well as besides either (neither) equally important finally for example for instance indeed in addition in fact furthermore further likewise moreover much less next nor not only this	<b>Concession</b> admittedly besides but even so even though nevertheless on the other hand	<b>Consequence</b> if not in that case if so otherwise that being the case under the circumstances	<b>Chronological/Sequence</b> all of a sudden at first as long as at the present time/ presently as long as as soon as at the same time at this instant currently first/second/third first and foremost first of all for a start from time to time in addition in a moment initially in the meantime occasionally to begin with without delay	<b>Emphasis</b> above all again besides even more for this reason indeed in fact more importantly to repeat truly
	<b>Confirmation</b> after this afterwards before this eventually next previously subsequently then	<b>Continuation</b> after this afterwards before this eventually next previously subsequently then	for a start from time to time in addition in a moment initially in the meantime occasionally to begin with without delay	<b>Identification</b> namely specifically that is to say thus
	<b>Conclude/Summarize</b> as a result finally in conclusion in summary to sum up therefore last	<b>Contrast</b> although but even though however on the other hand otherwise still yet	<b>Effect/Result</b> accordingly as a result all things considered because consequently even so in effect/effectively for/for this reason hence then therefore	<b>Introduction</b> as an illustrator by way of example especially for example for instance for one thing including in particular notably such as to illustrate
<b>Clarification</b> in other words for instance I mean that is to say to put it another way	<b>Conflict</b> and yet but by way of contrast conversely however in contrast	on the other hand still through when in fact whereas while		<b>Reference</b> as for this concerning this considering this on the subject

## **Office of Career Advising and Mentorship (OCAM)**

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Email: [med.careeradvising@usask.ca](mailto:med.careeradvising@usask.ca)

Tel: (306) 966-7275

[medicine.usask.ca](http://medicine.usask.ca)

## **Career Services**

G50, Lower Marquis Hall (below the bookstore)  
97 Campus Drive  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon, SK, Canada S7N 4L3

Email: [secc@usask.ca](mailto:secc@usask.ca)

Tel: (306) 966-5003



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