



MD Student Reference Letter Guide

The Office of Career Advising and Mentorship supports medical students throughout their undergraduate journey, including helping them prepare for the residency match process facilitated by the Canadian Resident Matching Service (CaRMS). Reference letters are a crucial component of the residency match application as they provide insight into a student's clinical abilities, professionalism, and suitability for their chosen specialty.

Even if you are a year or more away from applying for residency positions, it's not too early to start cultivating relationships with potential referees and asking them for reference letters. In fact, depending on the program you want to apply to, some referees may be able to submit their letters after they have worked with you but well before the CaRMS portal opens in September of your final year. Strong reference letters often reflect meaningful professional relationships built through clinical and research experiences.

This guide is designed to help you understand the expectations around reference letters, identify appropriate referees, and learn how and when to ask referees to write a reference letter for you. It also provides practical tips for managing requests through the CaRMS portal to ensure your materials are complete and submitted on time.

Start strong: The first steps to great reference letters

- **Know the CaRMS rules.** Review the CaRMS program descriptions to understand reference letter requirements. Some programs have specific criteria, such as requiring you to submit one of your letters from a different specialty.
- **Know if your specialty of interest requires a structured reference letter.** Some specialties (e.g., Family Medicine, Emergency Medicine, Orthopedic Surgery, Pediatrics, Psychiatry, and Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation) require referees to complete structured reference letters. The template for these letters can only be sent to referees once the CaRMS portal opens in your final year. Check the CaRMS program descriptions in your final year, as more specialties adopt structured reference letters each year.
- **Anticipate asking for more letters than you will need.** This will give you a buffer in case one of your referees is unable to write a letter or is late submitting it. Most applicants will collect between five and 10 letters.
- **Plan ahead.** Identify potential referees early so that you have enough time to build relationships with them and demonstrate your abilities. You might try to secure electives with physicians you've worked with before or have done research with as they would have seen your progression and can attest to your growth. If allowed when booking electives, request to work with preceptors who know you well or that you've worked with before.
- **Choose strong writers.** Review written feedback (e.g., EPAs and ITARs) from preceptors to help you choose strong letter writers. Ask current residents for their advice on which attending supervisors are more open to writing letters or are known to be strong writers.
- **Keep a record of your accomplishments.** Maintain an anonymized "brag file" with feedback, patient encounters and compliments, CanMEDS competencies, awards, and unique experiences that you can share with your referees when you ask them for a letter.

Maximize your impact: How to choose referees who can highlight your strengths

- **Select people who know you well.** A strong letter from someone who supervised you closely is better than a generic letter from a "big name" who barely interacted with you.
- **Choose referees who have supervised you.** Your referees should typically be faculty members who have supervised you clinically. Consider the strength of your rapport and the consistency of your relationship with the referee. There may be situations where it would be appropriate to get a letter from an attending physician you've worked with on multiple research projects.
- **Consider location.** If you're applying to an out-of-province program, it may be helpful to get a letter from someone who has worked at the site to which you're applying and/or from faculty who trained there.
- **Choose referees in your desired program.** Generally, you should aim for three reference letters for each specialty you are applying to. Check the CaRMS program descriptions for specific program requirements (such as the need to provide one letter from someone in another program). Always tell your referee the type of letter you are asking for (generic or program specific).
- **Trust your gut.** Pay attention to how your potential referee responds when you ask them if they could write you a strong letter. If they seem hesitant, you may want to choose someone else. Always say yes if someone offers to write you a letter.

Ready to ask? Here's how to do it effectively.

During your rotation:

- **Tell your preceptor EARLY in the rotation that you are interested in 'X' specialty and would greatly appreciate it if they could monitor your progress and provide a strong reference letter if they are comfortable doing so.**
- Keep track of specific encounters or clinical situations that showcase your work abilities and knowledge.
- Midway through your rotation, ask your preceptor if there are areas you can improve on – this is an excellent way to show your commitment to learning and professional growth.

At the end of your rotation:

- Follow up and ask potential referees if they are willing to write a strong, supportive reference letter for you.
- If someone agrees to be a referee, send them an email that includes:
 - anonymized highlights of your shift(s) together,
 - a CV (with a picture of yourself),
 - instructions as to whether you would like them to write a generic letter or a program-specific letter, and
 - a timeline of when they can expect to receive the reference request from CaRMS and the deadline by which they need to send in their letter.
- Ask your referee if they would like to be reminded about the CaRMS application deadline (and, if so, how frequently they'd like you to reach out) and their preferred method of contact. Let them know when you'd like the letter submitted, which should ideally be at least a week before the CaRMS application deadline.

Example of an email with supplemental information

[Student Name]
[Year in Program]
Reference Letter Supplemental Info
[Include your headshot]

Dear Dr. LastName:

Thank you for agreeing to write me a strong reference letter for my [Specialty] CaRMS application. I enjoyed working with you and getting to know you over the shifts we had together. [Add an anecdote or a personalized message here, such as "I appreciated you taking the time to chat about a career in this specialty."] I have compiled this document to showcase the highlights of my elective and my CV.

Highlights of our shifts together:

- **Date**
 - Learning goal [e.g., "Learning goal was to approach chest pain and ECGs. Was able to see three different chest patients, applying PERC, WELLS and HEART scores where necessary."]
 - Include other important highlights from your shift [e.g., "Good rapport with patients and staff; ECG teaching and interpretation; Addictions counselling with recurrent fentanyl overdose patient."]
 - ["We discussed my career aspirations, prep for residency, my interest in xyz."]
- **Date**
 - Learning goal
 - Other important highlights

Highlights of my elective

- Include a few high-level highlights from your electives [e.g., "Getting to know Anesthesia staff in Saskatoon and developing rapport with all the staff."]
- This could include a list of conditions seen.

Comments from all evaluations and EPAs during elective:

- Dr. LastName: "Good assessment plus knowledge base."
- Dr. LastName: "Best student I've ever had."
- Dr. LastName: "Excellent discharge instructions, excellent consultation requests."

CV Highlights:

Research and scholarship

- Include other relevant research projects [e.g., Completed Dean's Project in 2025. Presented poster at Dean's Research Day.]

You will receive a reference request through CaRMS to write a letter. I would be grateful if you could submit your letter by [date well before CaRMS deadline] so that I have time to compile and submit my complete application.

Thank you,
Student Name

Checklist

Before asking

- Review CaRMS Program Descriptions for reference letter requirements
- Identify referees who know you well
- Review your evaluation feedback to find strong writers
- Prepare a summary of your experiences
- Make your requests right after electives

When asking

- Ask in person (or by video call)
- At rotation start: be direct about your goals for the letter and ask about improvement areas
- At rotation end: ask if they can write a strong letter
- Clearly explain your CaRMS application plans
- Use the "Would you write a strong letter for me?" approach

After asking

- Provide an email with supplemental information to support the letter writing
- Send a polite reminder four weeks before the deadline if the referee hasn't submitted their letter
- Track the letters submitted and deadlines
- Thank them with a note or email after submission
- Update referees on your match results

Questions?

Book an appointment with the Office of Career Advising & Mentorship to discuss your specific questions.



Managing reference requests through CaRMS

- You must send all reference requests through the CaRMS portal, which opens in September of your final year.
- For specialties that don't use structured reference letters, you can use the Early Reference Request form, which can be found on the CaRMS website. CaRMS will securely hold the reference letters that they receive. We suggest that you use this service so that your referees can write their letters while their recollection is fresh.
- For specialties that use structured reference letters, you will have to wait until the CaRMS portal opens in September of your final year before you can ask CaRMS to send reference request forms to your referees. These include Family

Medicine, Emergency Medicine, Orthopedic Surgery, Pediatrics, Psychiatry, and Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation.

- Submit your referees' contact information to CaRMS well before the deadline so that your referees have plenty of time to prepare their letters.
- When you log in to your CaRMS account you will be able to see which referees have submitted their letters. You will not see the content of your reference letters.
- When preparing your application, choose what you expect will be your strongest and most relevant letters for each program.

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