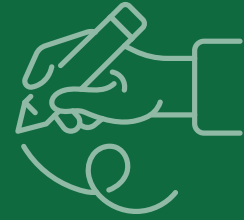


# Guidelines for Writing a Reference Letter for Learners



- Agree only when you know the student and feel confident in providing the reference so that it can be tailored to this specific student and is genuine in content and recommendation.
- You can ask for the student's CV to help you craft the letter and verify dates but avoid including details from the CV that are not relevant to the clinical observations you have made during your time with the student.
- Follow CaRMS guidelines for reference letters in terms of content and timing for uploading to their system; most students will provide the deadlines and directions.
- Do not share the letter with the student and state this in your letter of reference. Include some general comments about how you know the student and why you agreed to do the reference. Describe the rotation/experience in which you got to know the student including the duration and how well you know the candidate.
- For any reference letter but specifically for specialty programs, you can organize your comments or perhaps even your paragraphs by CanMEDS roles and try to include observations and comments on each of the following:
  - Medical Expert
  - Communicator
  - Collaborator
  - Health Advocate
  - Leader
  - Scholar
  - Professional

Information at <https://www.royalcollege.ca/rcsite/canmeds/canmeds-framework-e> can provide in-depth information on each of the roles and the specific competencies.

- Many programs will have a system for assessing the reference letter (scoring rubric) and how well it addresses the following:
  - History taking skills
  - Physical exam skills
  - Management decisions including pharmacological and non-pharmacological
  - Communication – verbal and writing skills such as clinical notes or consults/referrals
  - Teamwork and ability to collaborate with others including with inter-professional team members
  - Procedural confidence and experience including what procedures can be done or have been observed
  - Ability to manage workload, punctuality, professionalism, ability to meet deadlines
  - Comment on the student's response to feedback and willingness to accept feedback and/or general interaction as a learner on the team
  - Did they do a presentation during their time on this rotation? If so, comment on their preparation, grasp of the topic but also on their presentation skills.
  - Suitability to the discipline the student is applying for
  - A clear recommendation for the residency program based on the above
- You can provide examples from your practice, feedback from your staff and patients to personalize the content and demonstrate some of the characteristics you are describing based on these observations.
- Do not agree to do a letter of reference unless you genuinely know the candidate and can recommend them to the program of their choice. Tailor your letter to the program that will be assessing the candidate. Make sure this is clear from the student. You can provide a good reference but if you are recommending the student for an internal medicine residency and they are using the letter in their application to pediatrics, your reference may not be as helpful. But if you state the program correctly and you comment on the skills and appropriateness of that student to their chosen field, the letter is often more helpful.
- Do not agree to do a letter for a friend of the family, someone you have a close personal relationship with or a relative.

- Be careful when asked to provide a reference letter for CaRMS that is not based on a clinical rotation. If the program that the student is applying for wants a reference letter that comments on the student's involvement in your research or teaching, it may be appropriate. However if the program has a rubric for scoring reference letters that is solely based on their clinical work, it would not be appropriate to provide a reference and it would be better to coach/counsel the student on how to get a better reference.
- If you cannot provide a good reference that is thorough and appropriate for the discipline that a student is applying for or can't meet the deadline, it is better to gently say no and encourage the student to ask someone else giving them some guidelines on who might be in a better position to provide a relevant reference.
- Your letter should be at least one page. A short reference that is only a paragraph may not be helpful to the student.
- When you are asked by the student to provide a reference, ask a bit about their career choice decision and think about how this might inform your letter.

The best way to get to know what is expected for your program from a reference letter is to participate in your residency selection process. You will get to read a lot of reference letters and learn quickly what is helpful in the selection process and what is not.

If you have comments or suggestions regarding this Faculty Development CaRMS reference-writing guide, please let us know by emailing [medicinefaculty.development@usask.ca](mailto:medicinefaculty.development@usask.ca)

View the CaRMS reference guidelines [here](#) for further information.



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