

# Requesting recommendation letters for medical school

## A. General advice<sup>1</sup>

**Allow plenty of "turnaround time".** You want to be sure the letter writer has the opportunity to write a thoughtful, complete letter without worrying about an unrealistic deadline. We recommend that you request letters **at least a month** before you will need the letter, and preferably **two months** beforehand.

It is often best to request letters **at the close of an experience**, rather than waiting until you are ready to apply to medical school. For example, for a summer internship, it is preferable to request the letter at the end of the internship rather than a year (or several years) later when you are preparing to apply. If you do end up maintaining a strong relationship with a recommender, you always have the option of requesting an updated letter.

If you will be requesting multiple letters from a recommender, **request all of them at the same time** (if possible). For example, you could ask a recommender to create two versions of a letter, one for a fellowships application and one for medical school.

Ask the letter writer if she can write a **strong letter of support** for your application. If she seems hesitant or ambivalent, thank her for her time but do not request a letter from this individual. It is crucial that the person writing your letter is positive about your application and conveys that in her letter.

Decide whether you want to **waive your right** to see the letter of recommendation. Confidential letters often have greater credibility and they are assigned greater weight in the application process. Interestingly, many letter writers are less inhibited in praising an applicant when the letter is confidential. Therefore, we **highly recommend that you waive your right** to see the letter.

The letter of recommendation will be especially effective if the writers describe **specific examples and instances** whenever possible. So, provide each letter writer with **information relevant to your experience and application**. This could be a resume, a personal statement, a reminder of particular incidents or discussions, etc. Spend some time with the letter writer discussing how this information relates to your application. Let her know what would be helpful to include in the letter.

Recommendation letters for medical school should **be specific to medical school**. As noted above, it is encouraged to request multiple letters at the same time to make the process easier for your recommender. However, it is essential that medical school recommendation letters specifically discuss your **suitability for a career in medicine**.

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<sup>1</sup> Modified from: Harvard Office of Career Services, "Letters of Recommendation for Medical School," available at: <http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu/students/careers/medicine/applicationprocess/letters.htm>, accessed July 5, 2012.

Medical school recommendation letters will be kept in your Adams House file (and thus will be mailed to Adams). However, **the letter should be addressed “To the medical school admissions committee”** or something similar, rather than to the resident dean. Recommendation letters can be mailed to: Office of the Resident Dean, Adams House Mail Center, 26 Plympton St., Cambridge MA 02138.

Don't forget to **thank the person writing your letter** by sending a thank you note. Let her know the outcome of your application. Not only could her letter make the difference in whether or not you are accepted, you most likely will want to ask her for letters again in the future.

Additional advice is available on the OCS website

(<http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu/students/careers/medicine/applicationprocess/letters.htm>)

## **B. Suggested process for requesting letters**

1. Email the recommender explaining that you are hoping they might be willing to write you a letter, and inquiring whether they can write you a strong letter of support. Ask if they would be willing to meet you to discuss it further. If it is not possible to meet your recommender in person, then you can email the documents described below to your recommender, and ask to set up a phone call.
2. Use this meeting (or call) to remind them of your interests, goals, and experiences, as well as your reasons for a career in medicine. You should also bring a resume and a personal statement or other reflections on why you plan to pursue medicine as a career (this does not have to be your actual AMCAS personal statement).
3. Bring the following documents to the meeting:
  - i. Letter thanking the recommender and providing instructions on when you need the letter, where to send it, to whom it should be addressed, etc. If you are asking for other letters in addition to medical school (e.g., for fellowships), your letter should also contain information about the fellowship for which you are applying.
  - ii. Adams House waiver form
  - iii. Stamped, addressed envelope
  - iv. Resume
  - v. Personal statement
  - vi. OCS document containing advice to medical school recommenders (optional)
4. After your recommender sends in the letter, make sure to write a note or email (ideally, a handwritten note) thanking them for taking the time to write you a recommendation letter.
5. After you have been admitted to medical school, contact your recommenders to let them know where you will be attending school and thanking them again for their support.