

Guide to Serving as a Reference: Supporting Residency and Job Candidates

Developed by Members of the NPF Clinical Practice Advisory Group

1. PREPARATION (WHAT DO YOU NEED FROM THE CANDIDATE)

- a. Gain a clear understanding of the candidate's career aspirations and their motivations for pursuing the specific opportunity
- b. As the reference writer, the level of recommendation should be discussed with the candidate when agreeing to serve as a reference
 - i. If there are reservations or you do not feel you can recommend the candidate, have a crucial conversation with the candidate including:
 1. Why you cannot provide a positive letter of recommendation/reference
 2. Suggestions on what to improve, if applicable, prior to agreeing to serve as a reference
 3. Suggestions on next steps or guidance to the learner to identify a preceptor more equipped to write the candidate a positive recommendation
 - ii. Crucial conversations are important in situations with reservations or when you do not recommend a candidate:
 1. The candidate trusts you to guide them to meet their goal and achieve the position, or to navigate them to someone who can provide a stronger recommendation
 2. Writing a reference with reservations or not recommending without the candidate's awareness is unfair to the candidate
- c. The deadline to submit the reference
- d. The name of the program/organization/job the reference is for
 - i. Highlight specifics if warranted (I.e., community residency, PGY-2 specialty, etc.)
 - ii. Reasons the candidate is interested in the program/organization/job
- e. Student Materials
 - i. CV
 - ii. Any active involvement in extracurricular activities (local/state/national organizations, intern position)
 - iii. Highlights or certain attributes the candidate may want mentioned to help them stand out (personal achievements, personal statement)
 1. Research projects
 2. Publications
 - iv. Completed APPE rotations
- f. Resident Materials
 - i. CV
 - ii. Completed rotations
 - iii. Highlights or certain attributes the candidate may want mentioned to help them stand out (personal achievements, personal statement)
 1. Research projects, resident projects/presentations
 2. Publications

2. REFERENCE CONTENT

- a. Consider briefly describing your interaction with the candidate to provide additional perspective
 - i. If serving as a preceptor, describe the rotation environment
 - ii. If serving as a mentor, describe your experiences and interactions with the candidate
- b. Communication Skills – Written and Oral items to consider:
 - i. Documentation for consults and chart notes
 - ii. Written and verbal handoff
 - iii. Communication with other members of the healthcare team
 - iv. Patient education or other patient interactions
 - v. Interactions with the healthcare team during an emergency or code blue situation
 - vi. Case presentations, journal clubs, Grand Rounds, poster presentations, etc.
 - vii. Interactions with peers, mentors, preceptors, advisors, etc.
- c. Assertiveness
 - i. Is the candidate actively engaged in their learning and actively seeking opportunities?
 - ii. Consider providing details on the candidate's self-motivation
- d. Clinical Problem-Solving Skills
 - i. Pharmacy consults (e.g., vancomycin, anticoagulation, renal dosing, etc.)
 - ii. Clinical recommendations
 - iii. Drug information questions
- e. Acceptance of Constructive Criticism
 - i. How does the candidate respond to constructive criticism?
 - ii. Did you notice an improvement in areas that were discussed with the candidate?
- f. Independence
 - i. Does the candidate require more prompting in clinical activities and/or projects, or are tasks completed relatively independently based on expectations?
 - ii. If you precept multiple learners, consider highlighting the candidate's performance if they exceed normal expectations
- g. What to do if you do not know what to write for a specific characteristic or section?
 - i. Ask other preceptors who have worked with the candidate directly for feedback and/or examples
 - ii. Ask the candidate to self-assess and discuss examples in which they have showcased their skills
 - iii. Be honest and note if you are unable to assess the particular skill – though, expand upon other skills you can speak to from your experience with the candidate

3. **COMPONENTS OF THE PhORCAS Recommendation Form**

- a. For the most current guidance on serving as a reference for residency candidates and to review the components of the PhORCAS Reference Form, visit <https://www.ashp.org/phorcass>
- b. Examples of potential candidate characteristics the reference writer may be asked to evaluate include oral communication, assertiveness, time management, ability to accept constructive criticism, and clinical skills. Reference writers also have the opportunity to provide additional free text responses to elaborate on why the provided ratings were selected for the candidate characteristics
- c. Reference writers are typically asked to describe their relationship with the candidate and to provide an overall level of recommendation
- d. Letter of Recommendation/Opportunity to provide additional comments
 - i. The writer has the option to upload a Letter of Recommendation if they would like to leave additional comments regarding the application that may not have been covered in the form or to explain their ratings in further detail
 1. If the writer wants to add additional program-specific details for an individual program, they can do so in their letter of recommendation
 - a. Examples include details about fit, a desired rotation, etc.
 2. It is most helpful to programs reviewing applications if letter writers provide specific, detailed examples
- e. Once a writer has completed one recommendation, they can reuse the evaluation for that applicant, as writers tend to receive multiple requests from one applicant
- f. Additional resources and tools for completing a recommendation can be found at <https://help.liaisonedu.com/Letters by Liaison Help Center>

4. **LEVEL OF RECOMMENDATION**

- a. Ensure the final recommendation for a candidate is supported by the written content of the reference
- b. Provide your true recommendation based on your interactions with the candidate
 - i. Inflating a recommendation (e.g., highly recommending when you truly have reservations) can be misleading to programs and employers
 - ii. Candidates with “highly recommend” selected are not necessarily more likely to receive an interview compared to candidates with “recommend”
 1. An evaluation reported that 55.2% of candidates with a combination of “highly recommend” and “recommend” will be considered for an interview, compared to candidates with at least one “highly recommend” (14.1%) and all references with “highly recommend” (9.3%) (Skrupky L, et al. *J Amer Col Clin Phar* 2021;4:379-389)
- c. If the reference form does not have the option to select a specific recommendation (e.g., highly recommend, do not recommend), ensure your level of recommendation for the candidate is clear in the written content

5. TIPS AND TRICKS

- a. Use strong and illustrative verbs (e.g., [Active Verbs | Writing Recommendation Letters Online \(psu.edu\)](#))
- b. Be specific – it is important to demonstrate connection to the candidate to authenticate your credibility as their reference writer
- c. Be honest and genuine
- d. Do not agree to write a reference for a candidate if it will not be in strong support of their endeavor
- e. Have someone else read your reference to provide insight/feedback
- f. Address relevant information and experiences; avoid discussing content not pertinent to the recommendation or prospective job/residency
- g. See the do's and don'ts of writing an effective recommendation below

Additional Resources:

1. Brazeale, et al, **Tips for writing a letter of recommendation as a new practitioner pharmacist**, *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy*, Volume 80, Issue 5, 1 March 2023, Pages 245–248, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ajhp/zxac309>

For questions regarding this document, please contact newpractitioners@ashp.org
For similar resources, please visit the [ASHP New Practitioner Resources webpage](#)

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Do's and Don'ts for an Effective Recommendation Letter



**Review the candidate's
resume/CV**

**Personalize recommendation
letters to each candidate**

Utilize a simple format

**Provide a brief description of
your relationship to the
candidate and your experience**

**Include language from the
job/opportunity's description**

**Include your contact
information**



**Offer to write a
recommendation letter for a
candidate you have had only
negative experiences with**

**Use general language or vague
explanations**

Focus on too many qualities

Use passive voice

Forget to proofread

**Miss the deadline for
submission**