



## Introduction: Understanding Letters of Reference

- A letter of reference (LOR) is a formal document written by someone familiar with an applicant's qualifications, character, and experience, such as a former supervisor, professor, or colleague. It provides an objective testimonial intended to support applications for academic programs, research training, fellowships, awards, or employment opportunities.
- The LOR complements application materials such as a curriculum vitae (CV) or personal statement by offering insights into behaviors and interpersonal skills, attitudes, ethics, and qualities not readily captured in those documents. It should describe the applicant's strengths and performance supported by examples, ideally including comparisons to peers and commentary on core attributes such as integrity, motivation, or leadership.
- Although often used interchangeably, a letter of reference and a letter of recommendation serve slightly different purposes. A letter of reference offers a general endorsement of an individual's character, skills, or experience and is suitable for a range of opportunities. A letter of recommendation, by contrast, is tailored to a specific opportunity, such as a job, scholarship, or academic program, and provides a more detailed and targeted assessment. It typically includes specific examples of the applicant's achievements and qualifications relevant to that role.

### Before you begin; set the stage.

- Decide if you want to write a LOR. If you feel that you will be unable to write a favorable letter about the individual, you should inform him and give him the opportunity to decide if the applicant prefers to ask someone else.
- If you believe the letter must include negative information, inform the applicant and confirm they still wish for you to proceed.

### Gather Info Applicant; prepare writing LOR

- Allocate sufficient time to gather information and write, ideally  $\geq 3$  weeks before the deadline.
- Obtain the individual's academic curriculum, deadline, submission process, and the purpose of the post/application and link.
- Gather and review information on specific achievements that illustrate their abilities e.g., projects, career goals, publications, and personal statement
- Consider asking the applicant to provide a list of accomplishments and specific points they want emphasized.
- Review the full application package, including CV, personal statement, and possible other reference letters if available. This helps ensure your letter complements and aligns with the overall application. Knowing who else is writing a LOR may allow you to focus on distinct strengths and avoid redundancy.
- See Table 1: Information Gathering Checklist below for a detailed breakdown.

- Understand the purpose of the letter and application type.
- Know the specific review criteria and format required. Aligning the letter's content with these criteria is important.
- Unlike a general character endorsement, an effective letter of reference provides specific context, examples, and an informed assessment of the individual's suitability for the opportunity sought.

Anatomy of a strong Letter of Recommendation, see Appendix.

- Format and Lead-in:
  - Use institutional letterhead.
  - Include the date.
  - Provide recipient information and a personalized salutation. Address the recipient personally and professionally.
  - Submit as a PDF unless instructed otherwise.
  - Maintain a formal approach.
- Opening Paragraph:
  - State the purpose of the letter, introducing the candidate and the opportunity they are seeking.
  - Describe your position/department and your relationship with the applicant, including the duration and nature of interaction. Explain why you are in a position to evaluate the applicant.
  - State your overall recommendation.
- Body of the Letter (Multiple Paragraphs):
  - Summarize relevant work experience, technical skills, roles, and achievements.
  - Emphasize specifics over generic attributes. Provide specific examples to support claims. For example, detail research projects, publications, proficiency in techniques, and responsibilities handled.
  - Describe professional skills like writing, presentation, planning, leadership, critical thinking, and problem-solving, using specific examples.
  - Describe personal attributes such as work ethic, reliability, teamwork, curiosity, enthusiasm, initiative, and learning capabilities, supported by observations.
  - Include both generic attributes and specific attributes relevant to the post.
  - Assess "intangibles" that are hard to glean from a CV or test scores, such as integrity, motivation, capacity, and understanding.
  - Rank the candidate and their potential. Place the applicant's abilities within the context of their peers. This is where you can potentially mention your own mentorship capabilities or the size of the group you are comparing them to (e.g., "among the X students I have supervised").
  - Provide examples of how an individual's behavior or attitude compares to a reference group.
  - The Dreyfus model of skill acquisition (Novice, Advanced Beginner, Competent, Proficient, Expert) can be used as a framework for ranking, particularly in academic/professional settings. See Table 2: Classification Scheme for Resident Ranking.
- Summary Paragraph:
  - Reiterate the key points of emphasis.

- Restate your overall recommendation with enthusiasm, using strong descriptors (e.g., excellent, outstanding).
- Offer your availability for further discussion.
- End of Letter:
  - Include a professional sign-off (e.g., Sincerely, Dr. XY).
  - Your written signature.
  - Your degrees/titles.
  - Your personal contact information.

### Writing Tips & Considerations

- Length: Aim for 1-2 pages. Shorter letters may appear insincere, while longer ones can lose purpose and impact. Exceptions may apply for senior colleagues or prestigious positions.
- Clarity and professionalism: Use clear, direct language. Use bullet points in subsections and focus on each bullet having purpose. Bullet points is a widely accepted and often effective way to highlight applicant's skills, qualities, accomplishments, or examples of their work.
- Focus and evidence: Align content with review criteria. Provide concrete evidence to support statements. Emphasize the applicant's potential for future success.
- Discuss how the applicant has overcome challenges.
- Strengths and Weaknesses / Honesty:
  - Be honest; focusing on highlighting strengths.
  - For candidates who are solid but not top-ranked, focus on factual achievements.
  - Avoid discussing non-exemplary personal qualities.
  - Only mention weaknesses if specifically asked or when appropriate (e.g., professional schools, private sector).
  - If addressing weaknesses, frame carefully and emphasize progress.

### Ethical & Legal Considerations

- Sensitive Considerations: Avoid disclosing personal information without consent. Address gaps or weaknesses positively and respectfully, with the candidate's permission.
- Mitigating Bias: Use gender-neutral language and standardized formats. Consider using bias calculators to ensure fairness. Ref: <https://www.tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/>
  - Use applicant's name or the singular "they" if gender is unknown or if the candidate identifies as non-binary. For example, instead of "He is a dedicated worker," write "Alex is a dedicated worker" or "They are a dedicated worker"
  - Replace gendered adjectives (e.g., "caring," "compassionate") with ability- or achievement-focused descriptors (e.g., "accomplished," "skilled," "outstanding")
- Confidentiality: Share the letter only with the intended recipient. Obtain consent before sharing with anyone else, including the candidate. Maintain discretion and protect the candidate's reputation.
- Honest Portrayal: Provide a supportive yet honest portrayal to help the reader understand the applicant's profile.
- Legal Implications:
  - There is an ethical obligation to share adverse information if you would want to receive it, but balance this with legal risks.
  - Defamation requires proof of a false and derogatory statement that causes actual harm.
  - Carefully review negative comments to ensure they are accurate and factual.

- Do not disclose information without their written permission.
  - Only share statements that are factual, truthful, and made in good faith.
- Private information, such as medical information, should never be disclosed, unless you are given permission.

Appendix

<b>Component</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Comments and examples</b>
Format and lead-in	Use letterhead	Form of identification
	Date, recipient name, title, organization	Top left corner
	Personalized salutation	Dear Dr. X
	Unknown who to address	Dear members of Z Committee
Opening paragraph. Relationship with applicant Your role and expertise Introduce applicant Context how met Length of time	Purpose e.g., state name applicant and describe position.	This is a letter of support for [name] who has applied for.... I am pleased to write in support of....
	Your position, research program, department	I am an Assistant Professor of...at The UBC Division of Cardiology
	Relationship with applicant Duration and frequency of interaction	I have served as Ms. [name] master’s degree academic supervisor and research mentor for the last 2 years.
	State overall recommendation	I believe that Ms. [name] is an outstanding candidate for your doctoral program...I am convinced that Ms. [name] would be an exceptional addition to your doctoral program...Without reservation, I recommend Ms. [name] as an ideal candidate for your doctoral program.
Writing a not so enthusiastic letter	State nuanced recommendation Omitting certain qualities can signal reservations; experienced readers often interpret absence or brevity as a lack of strong endorsement.	Use terms like: like “room for improvement,” “has worked hard to,” “made great progress in” Ms. [name] took time to initiate experiments but now has several papers in press and is poised to make a meaningful contribution to the field. When Ms. [name] joined the lab, her writing skills were limited, but she has worked hard and made significant progress.
Body of letter can be multiple paragraphs.  Describe applicant’s (academic) performance, critical thinking & communication skills, general and specific	Summarize work experience, technical skills, roles on projects, responsibilities, and major achievements; rank candidate relative to peers.	Ms. Smith conducted several studies on mice to investigate... She became proficient in... She oversaw all aspects... This work resulted in 2 first-authored papers published in...
	Professional skills (writing, presenting, planning, leadership, critical thinking, problem-solving)	Ms. Smith has excellent writing and oral presentation skills, is highly organized, and shows great leadership skills

behavioral qualities, attributes, capabilities, and ranking etc.,  For key qualities, include specific examples. Refer to particular situations, assignment, or project.	General and specific attributes (work ethic, reliability, general and specific abilities to work with others, curiosity, enthusiasm, initiative, curiosity, learning capabilities).	General attributes: She is hard-working, highly reliable, works seamlessly with others, is curious and enthusiastic, and takes initiative Specific attributes: She conducted a complex multivariate analysis independently and identified key results that shaped final conclusions Consistently prepared and led journal club discussions with a strong understanding of the literature
Avoid qualifiers e.g., <i>generally</i> performs well, <i>tends</i> to score, <i>mostly</i> engages with	Rank relative to peers and potential for success. Consider those under own mentorship.	Ms. Smith easily ranks within the top 10% of MS students I have trained or observed... she will be an outstanding scientist. Among the [number] of students I have supervised, Ms. S ranks in the top 10% of [number] candidates.
Summary (single paragraph) Reaffirm support for applicant. Invite committee to contact you if further questions.	Summarize key points of emphasis	In summary, Ms. Smith is a passionate, highly talented, young scientist
	Restate overall recommendation and level of enthusiasm. Use appropriate descriptors such as: excellent, outstanding.	She has my strongest possible recommendation for a position as a doctoral student in your laboratory
	Offer your availability to comment Further on merit of candidate.	Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can provide further insight...
End of letter	Sign off (valediction) Your written signature Your degrees/titles Personal contact information	Sincerely or Kind regards

Table 1. Building blocks, content and sample phrases for writing letters of recommendation.

UBC logo

FACULTY MEDICINE

Department of Medicine  
address

Date

Addressee

To.....

Does not describe purpose, position, relationship, lack of context, time, year.

**Paragraph WEAK**

I am writing to endorse [name] application for the...fellowship. X has been a student in two courses I taught in the past academic year: course B, course C. These are second year courses for Majors in K. X has performed exceptionally well in these courses, and has shown clearly an interest in...as well as aptitude for scholarship in...I am very pleased to recommend her to you.

Lacks position referee, too general and vague.

**Paragraph BETTER**

It's my pleasure to write on behalf of Ms. Z application for the Public Health Research Fellowship. I was a member of Ms. Z's supervisory committee for her fourth-year honors thesis. Her research is on track and she came up with some interesting key findings. I am delighted to commend her to you as one of the ablest scholars I have encountered during my 10 years of teaching. She has an inquisitive mind and I am very pleased to recommend her to you.

**Paragraph BEST**

Referee introduces candidate, context, position, purpose relationship, time, specifics.

I am writing to express my enthusiastic support for Ms. Z's application for the Public Health Research Fellowship. I am writing this letter as Ms. Z's supervisor for a summer research project and as her former instructor in Course B. I have known Ms. Z for approximately 8 months. Of the 500 hundred students I have taught over the past 15 years, Ms. Z is in the top 10% of the group.

The Public Health Research Fellowship is geared towards students who have done exceptionally well in a senior course....As Ms. Z's lab instructor [class, course] in 2023 in the Faculty of Kinesiology at UBC, she performed above average and did well in [course, program]

## Body Paragraphs

Vague unsupported claims, lack of specifics, details and context, overuse of general adjectives, unclear language

### Paragraph **WEAK**

Although Z has been without our team for a short time, she clearly demonstrates her capacity to understand and contribute to research as well as effectively connects with participants. Z is often described as meticulous, efficient, and patient. She understands the importance of ensuring that the data she enters is valid and demonstrates this through her work precision.

Too vague, too general, lack of specific examples, unsupported claims

### Paragraph **BETTER**

Z is an articulate, patience, and hard-working student. During the problem-based learning sessions, Z demonstrated critical thinking skills and an ability to tailor communication skills to meet the needs of fictional patients. Z is a caring, genuine respectful, and visionary in the areas that she presents for discussion. She shows the promise of a student that can represent not only the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, but also UBC, and pharmacy profession.

Specifics, details, claims are supported by examples

### Paragraph **BEST**

Although, I have known Z for a short time, I have been impressed with several important facts of her performance that attest to her professional and scholarly/academic development. As her class professor and direct supervisor, I have had the opportunity to work closely with Z for the first semester of the pharmacy program. During this time, she has consistently demonstrated strong critical thinking and decision-making skills, particularly in settings...A, and B. In the first half of the course that I taught Z, she was one of eight students who participated in an intensive case-based learning module focused on complex drug interactions and patient-specific therapeutic planning. Z stood out by not only identifying potential contraindications in a multifaceted patient case with co-morbidities, but also by proposing a carefully reasoned alternative treatment that balanced efficacy with safety. Her ability to thoughtfully engage with the evidence, ask insightful questions, and explain her rationale to peers showed maturity and academic depth beyond her level of training. Moreover, her calm and patient approach during group discussions encouraged constructive dialogue and supported a positive learning environment for her peers.

Final Paragraph

Vague, empty wording, non-specific

**Paragraph WEAK**

Z is an individual of exceptional talents. He most certainly has a bright future ahead. There is no doubt that this young individual/man/woman will do well in the challenges that lie ahead. Please, do not hesitate to contact me should you require additional information.

Does not say why, not too convincing

**Paragraph BETTER**

Based on Z's commitment to helping others, her strong interpersonal skills and self-motivation, I strongly urge you to consider her for the scholarship. Please, do not hesitate to contact me should you require additional information.

Reaffirm support for applicant; like a conclusion of the overall qualities and expected performance applicant.  
Offer the opportunity to discuss further.

**Paragraph BEST**

Z possesses significant leadership potential and is already demonstrating the qualities necessary for a successful and impactful career, both academically and professionally. I am confident that she would not only benefit greatly from the mentorship and opportunities offered by the [Name] Fellowship Program, given her drive and enthusiasm, Z very likely to make positive contributions to her peers. . I offer my strongest recommendation in support of her application. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require any further information or wish to discuss her candidacy in more detail/ I would be pleased to communicate with you directly should you require additional information or have any questions.

**General Attributes** (broad, often subjective qualities that describe overall character or work ethic):

- Hard-working
- Reliable
- Team player / works well with others
- Curious
- Enthusiastic
- Motivated
- Honest
- Responsible
- Professional
- Takes initiative

*Example (general):*

"She is hard-working, highly reliable, works seamlessly with others, is curious and enthusiastic, and takes initiative."

**Specific Attributes** (concrete, observable traits or skills tied to tasks, accomplishments, or contexts):

- Produces high-quality research under tight deadlines
- Leads project teams effectively and ensures timely completion
- Asks insightful questions during lab meetings that move the project forward
- Independently designed and executed a data analysis plan using R
- Developed a poster that won an award at a national conference
- Consistently prepared and led journal club discussions with a strong grasp of current literature
- Demonstrated leadership by mentoring new lab members and orienting them to protocols

*Example (specific):*

"She independently developed a data management plan for a multicenter study, demonstrating both initiative and attention to detail. Her ability to interpret complex statistical results contributed directly to our manuscript's acceptance."

**More categories and examples**

- **Analytical Thinking:**  
*"She conducted a complex multivariate analysis independently and identified key trends that shaped our final conclusions."*

- **Research Skills:**  
*"He developed and validated a new survey tool used across three research sites, demonstrating strong methodological insight."*
- **Initiative:**  
*"She proposed and implemented a new data tracking system that improved our team's workflow and accuracy."*
- **Communication:**  
*"He presented our findings at an international conference with clarity and confidence, earning positive feedback from senior researchers."*
- **Leadership:**  
*"She supervised two undergraduate students, creating structured learning plans and providing mentorship that helped them secure research awards."*
- **Collaboration:**  
*"He coordinated effectively with a multidisciplinary team across institutions to meet all project deadlines."*
- **Problem-Solving:**  
*"When a major data discrepancy emerged, she quickly identified the issue and resolved it through a well-documented reconciliation process."*
- **Writing Skills:**  
*"He wrote the first draft of a manuscript that was later accepted in a peer-reviewed journal with minimal revisions."*
- **Adaptability:**  
*"She transitioned seamlessly to remote lab work, taking initiative to optimize virtual collaboration tools for the team."*

## Checklist

Category	Specific Item	Who is responsible?
Logistics	Recipient Contact Details	Applicant
	Submission Instructions (Deadline & Method)	Applicant
	Waiver Form (if applicable)	Applicant
Info/bio Applicant	Updated CV or Resume	Applicant
	Relevant Personal Information (Projects, Career Goals, Transcripts, etc.)	Applicant
	Specific Points/Attributes Candidate Wants Emphasized	Applicant, Referee
Intent / Info needed	Purpose of the Letter / Application Type (Job, Academic, Scholarship, etc.)	Applicant
	Specific Review Criteria if known	Applicant
	Relevant sample letters (use with caution)	Referee
	This document	Referee
Writing and submitting the letter	See above	Referee

## References:

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