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# **Writing an OUTSTANDING Letter of Recommendation**

**Martin J. Torres, PharmD, FCSHP**

**Herman J. Johannesmeyer, PharmD, BCPS**

# Presenters



**Martin J. Torres, PharmD, FCSHP**

**Director of Pharmacy | UC Irvine Medical Center**

Quality, Safety, Education, and Research

Department of Pharmacy, UCI Health

**Volunteer Clinical Professor**

Department of Clinical Pharmacy Practice

UCI School of Pharmacy & Pharmaceutical Sciences

[martit3@hs.uci.edu](mailto:martit3@hs.uci.edu)

# Presenters



**Herman Joseph Johannesmeyer, Pharm.D., BCPS**

Health Sciences Assistant Clinical Professor  
Department of Clinical Pharmacy Practice

**UCI** School of Pharmacy &  
Pharmaceutical Sciences

# Disclosures

Anyone in a position to influence the planning, review, or presentation of content in this activity, including Herman Johannismeyer, Dexter Wimer, Brent Hall, and Martin Torres has disclosed that he/she has no relevant financial relationships with ineligible companies.

# Objectives

By the end of this session attendees will be able to:

- Identify areas of improvement in current precepting practices
- Articulate challenges related to precepting learners
- Re-think approach to precepting using literature-based techniques
- Modify precepting techniques using evidence-based approaches
- Design learning experiences to further optimize precepting

# Objectives

By the end of this session attendees will be able to:

- Navigate the PhORCAS system
- Discuss recommendation letter etiquette for residency program applications
- Describe how to write an outstanding recommendation letter
- Review the time commitment associated with writing recommendation letters

# LOR Format, Etiquette, and How Letters are Compared

# Goal and Effectiveness of LORs

- Independent of the format, the goal of a letter of recommendation is to obtain an interview for the candidate
- There is a lack of consensus regarding the ideal screening tool for differentiating among PGY1 residency candidate characteristics and invitations to interview

1. Atyia SA et al. *Am J Health Syst Pharm*. 2020 Jul 23;77(15):1237-1242.

2. Hu D et al. *Am J Pharm Educ*. 2019 May;83(4):6714.

3. Cho JC. *J Clin Pharm Ther*. 2018 Dec;43(6):844-848.

4. Clarke CL et al. *Am J Pharm Educ*. 2020 Feb;84(2):7575.



# Format of a LOR

1. Establishing the context of your relationship with the candidate
2. Thirteen key characteristics for evaluation and comment
3. Four rating categories for each of the 13 characteristics evaluated
4. Four narrative comments and one program specific comment
5. Final recommendation regarding applicant

# Format of a LOR

## 1. Establishing the context of your relationship with the candidate

- How long have you known the candidate?
- The approximate number of hours per week?
- In what capacity is your relationship to the candidate?
  - Faculty
  - Preceptor
  - Employer
  - Professional organization, other

The longer the time frame and greater # of hrs increases the strength of recommendation.

Each of these capacities have strategic advantages which should be viewed within the context of the duration of the relationship.

# Format of a LOR

## 2. Thirteen key characteristics for evaluation and comment

**Please Note: The letter writer is asked to address at least three of these thirteen characteristics and indicate strengths or opportunities for improvement.**

**Is addressing 3 out 13 characteristics good enough?  
If not, what would be an appropriate number?**

# Format of a LOR

## 2. Thirteen key characteristics for evaluation and comment

- Writing skills (clinical, email, assigned writings)
- Oral communication skills
- Leadership / mentoring skills
- Assertiveness
- Ability to organize and manage time
- Ability to work with peers and communicate effectively
- Clinical problem-solving skills
- Effective patient interactions
- Dependability
- Independence & resourcefulness
- Willingness to accept constructive criticism
- Emotional stability and maturity
- Professionalism (attire & demeanor)

# Format of a LOR

## 3. Four rating categories for each of the 13 characteristics evaluated

- **Exceeds** what is expected to enter a residency program
- **Appropriate** for what is expected ———— (*Potential to weaken application*)
- **Fails to meet** the level expected ———— (*Damages application*)
- **N/A:** not applicable or observed

**Relative perspective for these rating categories: In comparison to other residency candidates that you have precepted or known.**

# Format of a LOR

## 4. Four narrative comments and one program-specific comment

- **Describe the nature of your interaction with the candidate.**
  - Normal or abnormal workload
  - Number of directly observed clinical activities
  - Degree of independence given to the candidate
  - Was independence increased or decreased
  - **How did skills compare with concurrent residents or students from same college or other college?**


# Format of a LOR

## 4. Four narrative comments and one program-specific comment

- Provide two strengths and how they will be beneficial to the applicant's success in a residency program.
- Provide two areas for improvement of this candidate and how you believe a residency will be able to work with these areas.
- Address any other characteristics or observances not mentioned previously.
- Enter any comments concerning the candidate's fit to this particular program.

# Format of a LOR

## 5. Final recommendation regarding applicant

- I highly recommend the applicant
- I recommend this applicant *(Potential to weaken application)*
- I recommend this applicant, but with some reservations 
- I do not recommend this applicant

**Should NOT be writing LOR!**



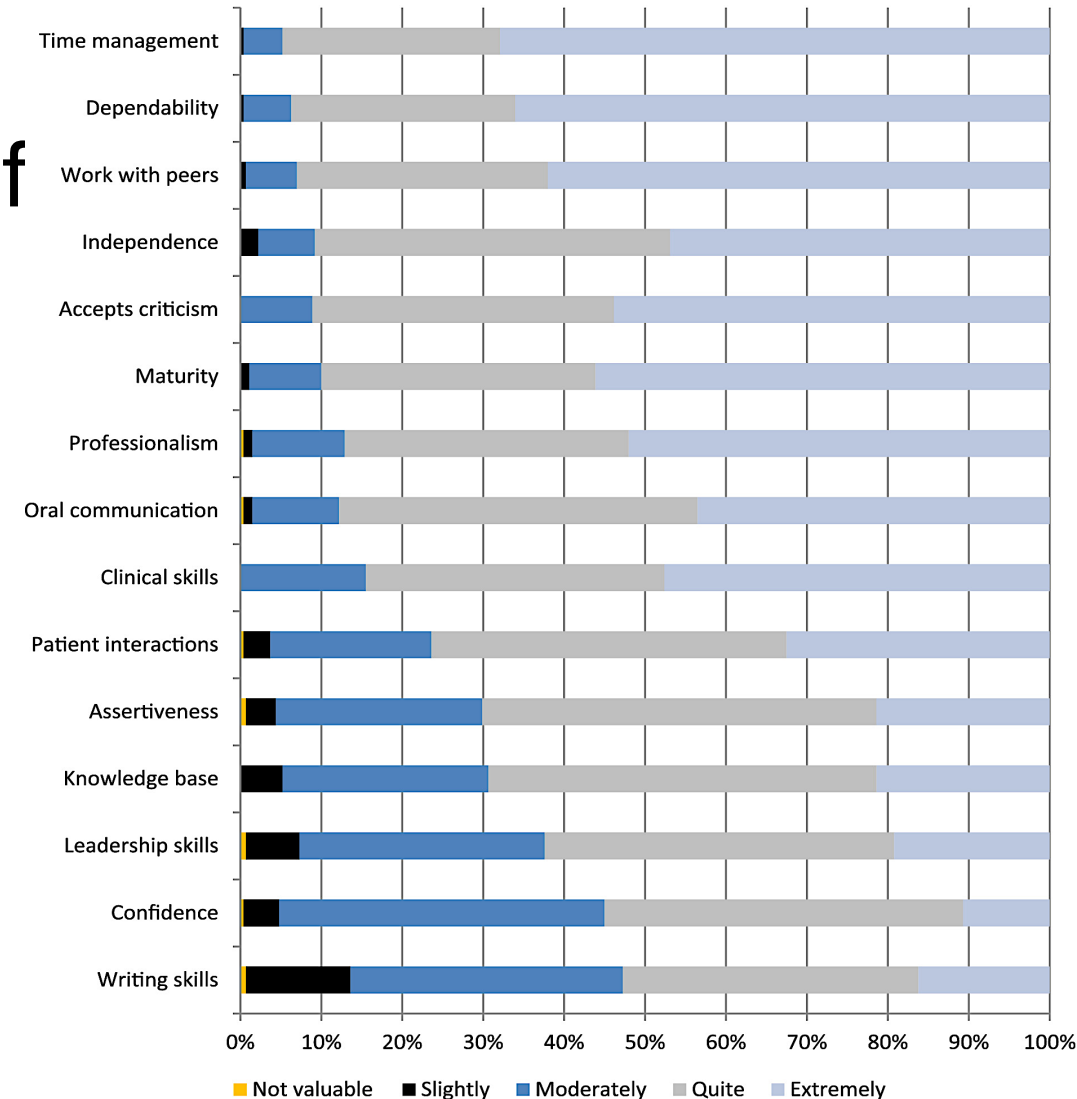
# Using the PhORCAS Template

- Entry into PhORCAS template is intuitive on website...but buyer beware
- Lost progress may not be saved
- Cannot carry over letters to subsequent years
- Consider writing recommendation on [an MS Word-based template](#) prior to upload + keep on file for future reference



# The Value of a Quality LOR

- LOR considered to be an extremely important component of a candidates application packet.
- All PhORCAS characteristics considered important – time management the single most important
- Some programs only interview applicant's that are “highly recommended”



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# A Strong versus an Outstanding LOR

# Strong vs Outstanding LOR

- A strong LOR is not good enough in today's competitive environment and most probably will NOT help your candidate obtain an interview.
- **An outstanding LOR should now be considered the minimum standard!**
- Letter writers need to be upfront with candidates if they are not capable of writing an outstanding LOR so the candidate can decide what is best for their application.

# Strong vs Outstanding LOR

Strong LOR	Outstanding LOR
<b>Duration of relationship:</b> Standard rotation block (6 weeks)	<b>Duration of relationship:</b> longer than a standard rotation block
<b>Letter writers:</b> faculty, preceptor, professional organization	<b>Letter writers:</b> addition of employer
<b>Characteristics evaluated:</b> 3 of 13 (= minimum)	<b>Characteristics evaluated:</b> 13 of 13 (= maximum)
<b>Comments in characteristics:</b> short explanations and of a general perspective	<b>Comments in characteristics:</b> more detailed with specific examples highlighting the applicant

# Strong vs Outstanding LOR

Strong LOR	Outstanding LOR
<b>Ratings:</b> combination of exceeds and appropriate	<b>Ratings:</b> all exceeds
<b>Narrative comments:</b> 2-3 of 4	<b>Narrative comments:</b> 4 of 4
<b>Fit for program:</b> ? (addressed in candidates Letter of Intent)	<b>Fit for program:</b> ? (addressed in candidates Letter of Intent)
<b>Final recommendation:</b> 2 of 3 highly recommend	<b>Final recommendation:</b> 3 of 3 highly recommend

# Time Commitment

- Schedule a meeting with the student applicant to fully understand their goals and aspirations so you can **personalize their LOR.**
- Review the student applicant's Letter of Intent and CV in addition to any reviews of their performance on rotations if possible.
- **Personalize your comments with specific examples** for the 13 characteristics and 4 narratives when possible.

# LOR Writing Pro-Tips

## Begin Writing LOR Early

- Assessment of a rotation student begins on rotation day #1
- LOR brainstorming can / should begin simultaneously
- Rotation feedback = LOR material
- Reflections of how students grew / changed may be more valuable than pure exposition

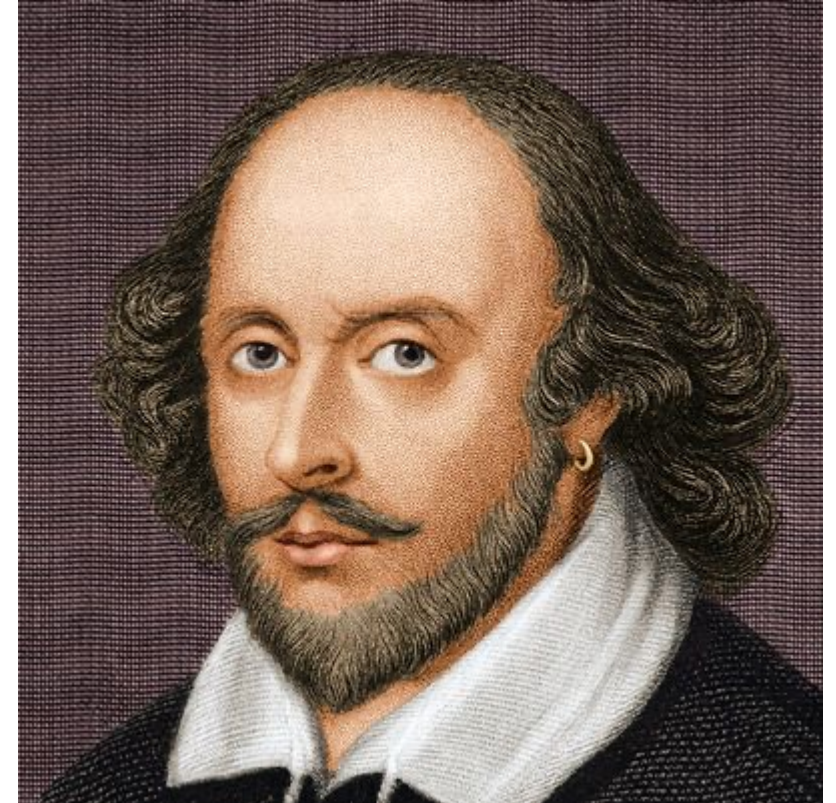




# LOR Writing Pro-Tips

## Provide a Detailed Narrative

- Inter-individual differences in interpretations of categorical assessments
- Residency program directors view detailed comments as important in LORs
- ↑ use of “standout” words → ↑ chance of interview offer (3 words vs. 3.8 words,  $P < 0.01$ )

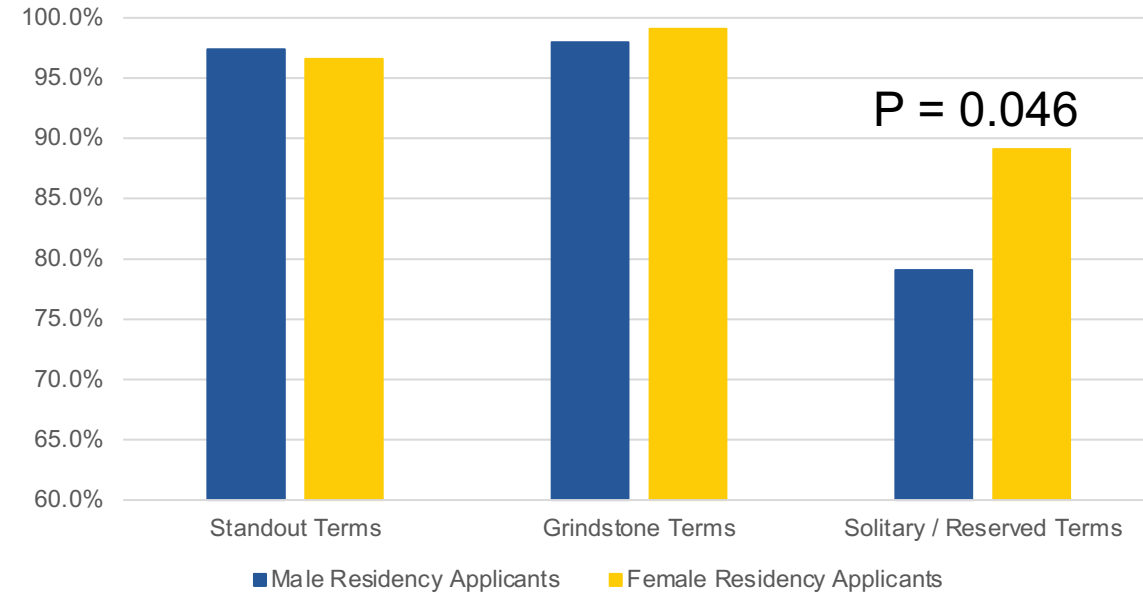


# LOR Writing Pitfalls

## Implicit Bias Awareness

- Gendered biases noted in LOR for specific medical specialties
- Biased LORs less frequent in pharmacy though some exceptions exist
- Intentional consideration of biases and detailed LOR-writing may stem accidental harm

Linguistic Terms Used in PGY-1 LORs



Application Factor Considered	Effect on Interview Offer Likelihood
Female gender	1.173 (0.895-1.537)
Second language	<b>1.872 (1.369-2.560)</b>
LOR word count	<b>1.001 (1.000-1.001)</b>
Discrepancy terms in LOR	<b>0.567 (0.405-0.793)</b>

# LOR Writing Pitfalls

## Writing a Letter You Don't Fully Support

- Must inform a student you cannot write a positive letter even though its uncomfortable
- Can be difficult, especially if you enjoy working with them but not a “top” student
- Other preceptors working in different settings may be able to speak to an early learner’s strengths



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# Questions?

# Assessment Questions

1. Which of the four final recommendations regarding an applicant should never be an option for a letter writer to select or they should not even consider writing a letter of recommendation (LOR)
  - a. I highly recommend this applicant
  - b. I recommend this applicant
  - c. I recommend this applicant, but with some reservations
  - d. I do not recommend this applicant

# Assessment Questions

2. When should a letter writer begin assessing a rotation student on the 13 different PhORCAS assessment domains?
  - a. On the first day of a student's rotation
  - b. At the conclusion of the student's rotation
  - c. Upon opening PhORCAS for the first time
  - d. The day prior to a letter's due date

# Assessment Questions

3. Which of the following four rating categories for the various characteristics appears to be supportive, but has the potential to weaken an application?
- a. Exceeds
  - b. Appropriate
  - c. Fails to meet
  - d. Not applicable

# Assessment Questions

4. Which of the following are domains of assessment within the PhORCAS letter of recommendation writing portal?
- a. Ability to work with peers and communicate effectively
  - b. Ability to work with very little sleep while taking minimal breaks
  - c. Independence and resourcefulness
  - d. Integrity and ethics
  - e. Ability to organize and manage time



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