



Finding the best people to write residency letters of recommendation

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Letters of recommendation are a vital part of the application packet. While test scores and other aspects are largely homogenized across all programs, a residency letter of recommendation can speak to an applicant's unique qualities and how those qualities will make them an effective resident physician.

AMA member Suzanne Allen, MD, MPH—vice dean for academic, rural and regional affairs at the University of Washington School of Medicine—is a veteran of the Match on both the medical school and residency program sides.

In a recent episode of the “AMA Making the Rounds” podcast, Dr. Allen offered insight on how medical students can go about finding faculty members to give them a comprehensive letter of recommendation for residency. Here are some key takeaways.

Draw on your rotations

When you go through both your core clerkship rotations and any elective or away rotations, you build relationships with faculty members.

“As you're going through your regular required rotations—for most students, that's in their third year—think about who that you've worked with might be a good person to write a letter of recommendation for you,” said Dr. Allen, chair of the AMA Academic Physicians Section and a family physician from Boise, Idaho.



“In general, those are going to be people that you've spent a significant amount of time with,” she noted. “So for instance, if you were a student at the University of Washington and you were participating in our longitudinal integrated clerkship, we would highly recommend that the person you spend the most time with during that six-month experience is one of your letter writers.”

Get a specialty-specific champion

Hopefully, you already did the hard work of standing out during any clerkship or elective rotations in your chosen specialty. A voice from a faculty member in your desired specialty will likely be helpful as one of the letters in your application packet.

“As you do a subinternship or a rotation in whatever specialty you're going into, you also want to make sure you're going to be able to get a strong letter from someone during that rotation as well,” Dr. Allen said.

Some specialties “will require you to get a letter of recommendation from the chair of the department at your medical school—so again, making sure that you're doing a rotation in that specialty where you will work with faculty within the department is going to be important for your application.”

Have the candid conversation

Residency programs are looking for letters of recommendation that sparkle. As you ponder potential letter writers, it's OK to ask them if they are able write a strong letter for you, Dr. Allen said.

“I usually recommend to students when they are thinking about asking for a letter of recommendation from a faculty member is actually asking the faculty member if they feel comfortable writing the letter and if they feel like they can actually write a strong letter of recommendation for you, said Dr. Allen.

“One of the reasons behind that is that what I feel like would be enough time for me to write a letter of recommendation for someone—a different faculty member may not feel comfortable with that.”

Give writers necessary information

Your letter writers need to know your qualifications and credentials. They also need adequate time to complete a letter.



“You want to make sure that if you want those letters of recommendation in by September, that you're giving your letter writers at least six weeks,” Dr. Allen said.

“If you want all your letters in by Sept. 1, you would want to let your faculty know: ‘Oh, thank you for writing this letter. Here's my CV, my personal statement. I'm applying in family medicine and can you please complete this by Sept. 1?’

“If you don't see that letter then within a month of the faculty member confirming with you that yes, they will [write it] ... sometimes a gentle reminder by the end of August can be really helpful for that faculty member.”