



How Preceptors Impact Residency Applications

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Disclosures

- I have no disclosures.

Objectives

1. Understand the residency application timeline.
2. Review the clinical rotation evaluation and understand how preceptor comments are used on the student's MSPE.
3. Identify 5 elements of impactful MSPE comments.
4. Discuss letters of recommendation and their impact on residency applications.
5. Identify 6 elements of an impactful letter of recommendation.

Definitions

1. **Medical Student Performance Evaluation (MSPE):** The MSPE is a summary letter of evaluation intended to provide residency program directors an honest and objective summary of a student's salient experiences, attributes, and academic performance.

Definitions

1. Letter of Recommendation (LoR): A personalized, narrative evaluation written by a faculty member, preceptor, or supervisor that endorses a student's qualifications, performance, and potential for success in a residency program.

Application Timeline

The Residency Application Timeline

1. Overview of dates:

1. June of 3rd year: Applicants receive access to the LoR Portal
2. June of 4th year: Applicants may begin working on their applications
3. Early September of 4th year: Applicants may begin submitting applications
4. Late September of 4th year: Programs may begin reviewing applications

The Residency Application Timeline

1. What might a 3rd year student ask for, and when?
 1. Letter of Recommendation: May begin asking as early as September of 3rd year through the beginning of 4th year
2. What might a 4th year student ask for, and when?
 1. Letter of Recommendation

Understanding Rotation Evaluation Use and 5 Elements of Strong Narrative Feedback

The Rotation Evaluation

1. Purpose of Preceptor Comments in the MSPE:
 1. Provide narrative summaries of clinical performance
 2. Represent direct observations of students on core rotations
 3. Used in the “Clinical Performance” section

The Rotation Evaluation

1. Who Uses Them?
 1. Residency Program Directors (PDs) during the interview decisions
2. What They Should Reflect:
 1. Clinical ability
 2. Professionalism
 3. Communication
 4. Growth and potential

Examples of “good” comments and “bad” comments

Good Comment:

“Jane demonstrated excellent diagnostic reasoning and communication skills. She consistently arrived prepared, formulated thorough differential diagnoses, and communicated clearly with both patients and the care team. Jane is one of the top 10% of students I have worked with this year.”

Why it works:

1. Specific strengths
2. Comparative language
3. Covers multiple domains (knowledge, communication, professionalism)

Examples of “good” comments and “bad” comments

Bad Comment:

“John did a good job on the rotation. He was pleasant and worked well with others.”

Why it’s weak:

1. Vague
2. Lacks detail
3. No assessment of clinical skills
4. No comparative or growth statements

- Discussion:

What's one thing you believe a good comment should include?

How Many Elements Should a Good Comment Include?

While there's no universal rule, a high-quality MSPE comment should ideally include at least 4–5 of the following elements:

1. Clinical knowledge
2. Clinical reasoning
3. Communication skills
4. Professionalism
5. Work ethic/initiative
6. Teamwork
7. Patient interaction
8. Response to feedback/growth
9. Comparative language (if applicable)

Tip: Aim for 3–5 sentences, each touching on a different element.

Common Corrections Made to Preceptor Comments for MSPE

MSPE editors often need to correct or adjust preceptor comments for clarity, fairness, and appropriateness. Common issues include:

Needs Correction	Better Practice
Typos or grammatical errors	Proofread carefully
Overly glowing or vague praise	Use specific, evidence-based examples
Lack of comparative language	Add if you can fairly do so
Contradictory tone (e.g., “excellent student” but lists major flaws)	Be honest and balanced
Confusing and/or inappropriate references (e.g. wrong name, “patient” instead of “student doctor;” “student did well despite illness”)	Ensure correct student name/title is used; be wary of sharing information regarding personal student issues

What Do Program Directors Say About the MSPE and Comments?

From the 2024 NRMP Program Director Survey (latest version available as of 2025):

1. Usefulness of MSPE in Interview Decisions
 1. 81% of PDs consider the MSPE when deciding whom to interview.
 2. It is often among the top 5 most important factors, particularly for:
 1. Family Medicine
 2. Internal medicine
 3. Pediatrics
2. What PDs Value in MSPE Comments
 1. Clear comparisons to peers
 2. Specific descriptions of performance
 3. Red flags or professionalism concerns (if applicable)
 4. Evidence of growth over time

Letters of Recommendation & Their Impact

How Are Letters of Recommendation Used in Residency Applications?

1. Reviewed by nearly all programs for interview and rank decisions
2. Provide personalized insight into a student's:
 1. Clinical performance
 2. Work ethic and professionalism
 3. Communication and teamwork
 4. Unique traits or potential
3. Often carry more weight than grades or class rank in competitive programs
4. Used to differentiate students who may look similar on paper

What Makes an LoR Impactful?

1. Personalized
2. Detailed & specific
3. Comparative (when appropriate)
4. Balanced – strengths and areas of growth
5. Credible – honest and evidence-based
6. Positive in tone, but not generic

Examples of Strong vs. Weak LoRs

1. Impactful Excerpt: “Emma is among the top 5% of students I have worked with in the past decade. She consistently impressed our team with her clinical reasoning, compassion for patients, and leadership during rounds.”
2. Weak Excerpt: “Emma was a pleasure to work with. She was professional and did everything asked of her.”
3. Why it's weak:
 1. Generic praise
 2. No specific strengths
 3. Lacks comparison or insight

How Many Elements Should Be Included?

An impactful LoR should include at least 5 of these 7 elements:

1. Nature of your relationship to the student
2. Duration and context of observation
3. Specific clinical skills or accomplishments
4. Professionalism and work ethic
5. Teamwork and communication
6. Comparative assessment (“top 10%,” etc.)
7. Supportive closing statement (“I strongly recommend...”)

Good Comments to Include

- Very helpful to the team, keen perception of procedural skills that allowed her to participate in OR procedures above the usual skill level of her peers.
- Well prepared with all information needed to formulate a treatment plan and was able to **prioritize** and integrate bits of evidence into a cohesive, logical story.
- Quickly assimilated information and put data into action.
- Presentations in a clear, concise manner, well beyond most third-year students.

Good Comments to Include

- Deep thinker with a deep knowledge base, delivered well-crafted and thought-out answers to questions.
- Quickly acclimated into our clinic, its EMR and our processes.
- Use competency-based language and provide illustrative examples.
- Able to effectively apply basic science principles to clinical situations as evidenced by _____.
- Quickly grasps complex material and is able to explain it effectively to others.

Comments to Avoid

- Needs to read more.
- Handwork is a strength.
- Participates well in class.
- Will do great in primary care- be careful here.
- Outstanding student.
- Engaged and interested.
- Smart, enthusiastic, professional.
- Will eventually be a great physician.

Practical Advice for Busy Preceptors

How to manage LoRs efficiently:

1. Keep a template or checklist to guide structure
2. Ask for a CV and personal statement from the student
3. Take notes during the rotation or immediately after

Practical Advice for Busy Preceptors

How to manage LoRs efficiently:

4. Use dictation tools or scribe software
5. Draft the letter with help from the student
(if appropriate)
4. Reuse structure, customize content

Discussion:

Have you said no to writing a letter of recommendation?


If so, how did you address that?

How to Say No to an LoR Request?

- Acknowledge and express gratitude for the request in a timely manner
- Offer an honest reason for declining
- Consider offering alternative assistance such as CV or PS review
- Avoid giving too many details about the decline
- It is ok to decline

What Do Program Directors Say About LoRs?

From the 2024 NRMP Program Director Survey:

- LoRs are among the top 3 factors in interview selection
- 86% of PDs said LoRs influenced who they interview
- PDs value:
 - Comparative statements
 - Specific examples of performance
 - Insight into character and work ethic  “The best letters come from people who clearly know the applicant and describe their strengths in real-world clinical settings.”

Key Takeaways

1. Your words matter — MSPE comments and LoRs play a critical role in a student's residency application.
2. Be specific — Avoid vague praise; use examples of behaviors and accomplishments you directly observed.
3. Use comparative language — If appropriate, rank or contextualize the student's performance.
4. Highlight key qualities — Focus on clinical reasoning, professionalism, communication, and growth.
5. Be honest and constructive — Balanced feedback builds credibility and helps programs trust your assessment.
6. Efficiency is possible — Use templates, notes, and student-provided materials to streamline the writing process.
7. Think like a program director — What would you want to know if you were selecting a resident?

Questions?