

## Capstone for Impact Submission | GY2019

---

**Project Title:** Writing Rights

**Student Name(s):** Guduguntla, Vinay

**Advisor Names(s):** Dr. Vineet Chopra

**Branch:** Systems & Hospital Based Care

**Path of Excellence:** Innovation and Entrepreneurship

**Handover/Transition:**

If this project can be continued by another UMMS student, you may contact them at the following email address/phone number (N/A if project cannot be handed over): **No**

---

**Summary:**

In academic medicine, letters of recommendation are a way of life – one that will never go away. While they are “free”, they do not come easy. They often require careful thought and preparation on both the writer and the requestor’s behalf. However, the payoff can be immense, as existing literature has well characterized the importance of LORs and the critical role they play in applicant selection.

While much has been written about the content of recommendation letters, little attention has been given to those who write them. This gap is important, as often, letter writers approach the task as a rote chore or tedious undertaking, rather than as an opportunity to elevate a mentee.

Moreover, we know that many trainees are ill-equipped or poorly informed on how to best manage the roadblocks in communication, planning, and follow-up that accompany this endeavor. As a result, a lackluster letter is often produced and there can be direct harm to the application or professional relationship. These “wrongs” must be righted to ensure a strong recommendation.

In this essay, we characterize five prototypes of problematic letter writers, using tongue-in-cheek names to describe stereotypical behaviors. Our aim is to not only help writers self-diagnose, but also encourage requestors to identify patterns before a single lapse leads to multiple problems.

**Methodology:**

Qualitative Analysis

## **Results/Conclusion:**

"In academic medicine, letters of recommendation (LORs) are a way of life. While they are "free", they do not come easy. The journey is difficult; numerous emails, phone calls to administrators, and "chance" run-ins with prospective writers often represent the warm up for the big "ask." However, the payoff can be immense, as existing literature has well characterized the importance of LORs and the critical role they play in applicant selection.<sup>1</sup> A strong letter not only highlights an individual's skillset, but serves as a personalized, summative endorsement of a trainee's ability. In fact, well written LORs are predictive of performance in medical school.<sup>2</sup> Given their importance, it is imperative that requestors and letter writers are, to put it colloquially, "on the same page".

While much has been written about the content of LORs, little attention has been given to those who write them.<sup>3</sup> This gap is important as often letter writers approach the task as a rote chore or tedious undertaking, rather than as an opportunity to elevate a mentee. Moreover, we know that many trainees are ill-equipped or poorly informed on how to best manage the roadblocks in communication, planning, and follow-up that accompany this endeavor. Too often, then, the product is a lackluster letter that can hurt an application or professional relationship.

Though small mistakes over the years are natural when undertaking the responsibility of writing LORs, writing wrongs are sets of behaviors that might impair trainee advancement. These "wrongs" must be set right in order to ensure a strong letter and successful career development. In this essay, we characterize five prototypes of problematic letter writers, using tongue-in-cheek names to describe stereotypical behaviors. We aim to help writers self-diagnose what ails them, while empowering requestors to identify patterns that may be problematic.

### Letter Writing Wrongs

#### The Phantom

The Phantom is a high-profile faculty member who is highly ambitious and consequently, very busy. They travel frequently, have packed calendars and are difficult to reach. After a prolonged wait for a face-to-face meeting, they quickly agree to write letters of recommendation. However, they are prone to doling out "the silent treatment

#### **Reflection/Lessons Learned:**

which (in US vernacular), is the act of "completely ignoring someone by resorting to silence." Despite a prolonged chase by the requestor, marked by a number of increasingly urgent emails, the Phantom becomes unresponsive to all forms of communication. They are eventually lost to follow-up, leaving the trainee high and dry.

#### The Yes-Man or Woman

The Yes-person is overcommitted. They lack the ability to say no to trainees, eventually leading to a daunting stack of letter requests. At their core is a conflict-avoidant personality and a strong desire to be liked by all.

These letter writers over promise, resulting in “high-output failure” and diminished quality. Even if they are able to fulfill all the commitments, the end result is often a letter that fails to convey the trainee’s unique strengths and skills. Eventually, the recommendations become monotonous, and readers, seeing the pattern, begin to devalue endorsements from the writer. Moreover, even if the writer is able to fulfill all of their commitments, the end result is often cynicism and burnout.

### The Sloth

The Sloth is, simply put, slow. Known to take a prolonged period of time to finish tasks (including LORs), these writers have fair communication skills, but always seem to have a reason for delays. After a few exchanges, applicants become fearful of pestering their letter writers - leading to an eerie silence as deadlines approach. Due to the increasing wait times, trainees often postpone submission of their applications or scramble to find additional letter writers. The process often yields a loss of trust, fracturing the relationship between writer and requestor. Overall, these writers can get the job done, but at a frustratingly slow pace.

### The Cookie-Cutter

The Cookie-Cutter takes the all too familiar approach to writing: copy and paste. Here, standardized forms and templates are used to compose LORs. The result is often a generic, vague product riddled with typos. Errors such as switched pronouns, incorrect names, and remainders of templated phrasing abound. Such writers are also the most prone to using stereotyped adjectives for men and women.<sup>4</sup> Often, men are described by their ability, while women are described by their effort,<sup>5</sup> propagating unconscious gender bias in reference writing. Some programs may begin to doubt the authenticity of the applicant’s entire portfolio as many such letters have been recognized as plagiarized or otherwise questionable.<sup>6</sup> If you have seen one cookie cutter letter, you have seen them all.

### The Delegator

The Delegator is a senior faculty member with limited bandwidth, who pawns off the task of putting pen to paper onto the trainee. They request completed drafts of the letters, promising to “touch up” or “embellish” these prior to submission. While this is billed as giving requestors the freedom to highlight relevant personal details of their applications, applicants often get lost in the minutiae and unknowingly leave out the proper verbiage for a convincing recommendation. As a result, the end product feels one-dimensional. Moreover, there are a number of trainees who feel disenfranchised by this approach, as it is contrary to the spirit of letter writing.