

LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION (LoR) FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



1. What is the purpose of the LoR?

To demonstrate to postgraduate training programs (residency, transitional year and fellowship) that, as an applicant, you have the professional and personal qualities to succeed as a trainee and eventually as a practicing physician.

2. Who should I ask to write a LoR?

Anyone can write a LoR. However, you should choose individuals who will agree to write an excellent, very positive LoR that will strongly support your candidacy.

When considering potential LoR writers, ask yourself:

- Did I do well on their rotation?
- Do they think highly of me?
- Did I work closely enough with them?
- Can they provide specific examples to use to reflect my strengths and show they know me well?
- Do they have the time to write the LoR to deliver it within the required timeframe?
- Do they seem to genuinely care about my future?
- Do they have good communication skills?
- Do they know me well enough to comment on my personal and professional attributes?
- Have I discussed my career aspirations with them, and did I provide them with a current CV?
- When I asked them, did they readily agree, immediately and without hesitation, to write a strongly positive letter?

3. Do LoRs need to come from writers in my chosen specialty?

- An enthusiastic, persuasive and fact-filled letter from a writer in your desired specialty may be weighed more heavily than one from another specialty, but this preference varies among programs unless they specify otherwise.
- Many programs prefer a minimum of 1–2 LoRs from writers in your chosen specialty (and ERAS allows up to 4 total).
- LoRs from residency/fellowship programs in your chosen specialty are normally highly desirable; thus, a strong letter from a writer who eagerly and enthusiastically supports you can come from any specialty, but it must be apparent they know you well enough.

4. When should I begin requesting LoRs?

- To best position yourself for the potential for landing an interview, ranking high among other applicants, and, ultimately, matching in your chosen specialty, you should begin identifying and soliciting LoRs from faculty and/or physicians during year 3 of medical school, ideally those from rotations in the desired specialty and those in which your performance was the best (whether or not in your chosen specialty).
- It is optimal to begin year 4 of medical school with at least 2–3 LoRs, despite the fact that you'll likely obtain more during year 4.
- The main goal is to have at least 3–4 LoRs and a complete application when the ERAS application season begins.

5. How many LoRs should I obtain for my application?

- You are encouraged to request and obtain at least 4 LoRs by the time you submit your ERAS application.
- You can upload any number of LoRs to your ERAS application, but you must select which 3–4 to send to any specific program; it is also possible to choose to send certain LoRs to specific programs based on who wrote the letter and/or your experience with that program.

6. Do I need a department-specific LoR?

- Possibly. This is usually a program-specific requirement, so you'll need to check the website of each specific program to see if there is a specific request/requirement.
- In some cases, medical schools may not have a department specific to a desired specialty. In these situations, consider soliciting a letter from a physician in the specialty or asking the program what would be an acceptable alternative (dean-level faculty, someone in a related specialty, a physician advisor or mentor, a physician in a leadership role outside of your school, a current or former program director or faculty member, etc.).

7. If I haven't worked directly with a department faculty member in my chosen specialty, how will they be able to write a strongly positive LoR?

Training programs realize and expect that LoRs from department physicians will provide an objective appraisal of you that will highlight your performance, emphasizing what the specialty considers to be priorities for competitive and desirable candidates. If you haven't directly worked with the LoR writer, they can still provide a good LoR. This is often done by soliciting input from colleagues who have worked with you and/or by observing you in a clinical setting themselves.

8. What is the best way and time to request a LoR?

- Try to ask in person (or virtually or by phone, if necessary) via a scheduled meeting, optimally at or near the end of a rotation or soon after its completion.
- Try to identify a prospective letter writer after having spent enough time with them to form a relationship and level of familiarity that will allow them to write a strongly positive LoR.
- As long as you have the opportunity to engage with an attending/precepting or other physician, even if you've had limited ability to work directly with them, you should be fine. Sometimes letter writers will solicit input from residents and fellows, other staff and possibly even patients and families with whom you have interacted.

9. How should I ask for a LoR?

- Remember, it's best to ask for the LoR in person. If that is not feasible, try to arrange a virtual meeting or phone call. Because you likely will not ever be able to read your LoR, it is a good idea to evaluate the enthusiasm of the prospective letter writer to help determine if they are willing and able to write you a strongly positive letter; the best clues are the nonverbal ones you can get only in person.
- Suggest requesting, in advance (in person or via email or phone), a meeting to discuss your applications for residency/fellowship. This should not be complex but rather just a simple request to meet. At the meeting, request a strongly positive LoR; this allows the prospective writer to decline (and that is better than a negative, neutral or even weakly positive letter), to respond to the word "strong" by affirming that the letter will indeed be strong or to state that they can't write a strong letter. Regardless of their decision, this provides you with valuable information.
- If the requested writer agrees to write a LoR for you, then ask, "what can I give you to help you write the letter?" Or, even better, you can supply them with the items listed in FAQ #13.
- Remember that this is an issue that most medical students face, so on rotations for a prospective letter writer, try to be engaged in such a manner that will make them enthusiastic about writing a letter for you. Try to facilitate opportunities to "shine" on rotations by exceeding their expectations.

10. What if I'm not comfortable asking someone for a letter during a rotation?

Work on building a good relationship during and after the rotation and ask the potential letter writer if they'd be receptive to you following up with them to obtain additional information from them about their knowledge of and insight into your desired specialty and your potential candidacy as an applicant.

11. Can I view my LoR?

- Possibly. This is usually a program-specific requirement, so you'll need to check the website of each specific program to see if there is a specific request/requirement.
- In some cases, medical schools may not have a department specific to a desired specialty. In these situations, consider soliciting a letter from a physician in the specialty or asking the program what an acceptable alternative would be (dean-level faculty, someone in a related specialty, a physician advisor or mentor, a physician in a leadership role outside of your school, a current or former program director or faculty member, etc.).

12. What if I am unable to get any LoRs during year 3 of medical school?

This would be unusual. Medical students should typically be able to communicate effectively enough to request a LoR. If you initially find it difficult to do this, speak with a faculty member about how to improve your interpersonal communication skills and consider arranging a "mock" request during which they can assess your techniques and provide you with feedback or tips on how to improve the request process.

13. What should I provide for a letter writer?

- Your CV and personal statement
- LoR submission instructions for ERAS
- Waiver of Student's Right to Review the LoR
- Any LoR formatting requirement, as applicable
- A cover letter
- A photo (if requested)
- The deadline for when the LoR needs to be submitted
- A thank you note for agreeing to write a LoR on your behalf

14. What if a potential letter writer asks about what should be included in a LoR?

You can safely state that programs usually want to know:

- Specific information about how long and in what capacity they have known you (preceptor, teacher, mentor, research supervisor, etc.)
- Your strengths and an appraisal of your readiness for residency and/or your expectations for residency
- Any distinguishing characteristics that will help set you apart from your peers
- Specific examples that illustrate the statements made about you

Additionally, a LoR should be formatted as such:

- The date and the writer's signature should be included, and the LoR should be composed on official letterhead
- The file should be saved in .pdf format, and the file size should not exceed 500 KB

15. Can I request a LoR from someone I am related to but with whom I did a rotation?

In order to have a LoR be perceived as objective, writers should not be related to you. Similarly, it is best to avoid LoRs from family friends, clergy and individuals who you have supervised.

16. Can I request a LoR from someone who knows me well but is not a physician?

You can, but you should strive to have LoRs from physicians, whose letters will be intended for their physician peers.

17. Is there anything that should not be included in a LoR?

Yes, a LoR should not include your height, weight, age, race, ethnicity, place of birth, political affiliation, gender preference, marital status, children, family names or details, any licensing exam scores, license or certification identifiers or grade point average.

18. What is an appropriate timeframe after requesting a LoR to follow up about its status or remind a writer of an applicable deadline for its receipt by ERAS?

- It is suggested that you allow a LoR writer at least 2–4 weeks after the request to compose and submit your LoR.
- It is strongly recommended that you request a LoR from someone as soon as you identify him or her as a prospective writer and that you communicate to them the desired timeframe for finishing the LoR when you make the original request.
- Do not wait until the last minute to request a LoR, and make sure to solicit more writers than you'll need in case one of your writers is unable to fulfill your request on a timely basis for whatever reason.

19. If I have further questions about LoRs, what resources are available to me?

Each medical school has staff and faculty with expertise in career development, professional advising and mentorship. In addition, physicians in your desired specialty, preceptors, program websites, specialty colleges or other organizations, alumni affairs offices and AACOM can offer assistance.

20. What if I ask for a LoR and the writer says, “You write the letter and I’ll review & sign it?”

There isn't any universal guidance on this. However, you should be aware that, despite the fact that you are the person most familiar with your own accomplishments, some will consider this a breach of personal and professional ethics if it is discovered, which could result in negative consequences for you that would have been completely avoidable. Even if you were to do this, it would be advisable to insist they (the “writer” of the LoR) carefully review the text and make any changes they feel necessary (such as omitting your mention of your Nobel Prize in Medicine). Furthermore, if possible, it would be advisable to provide them with source-based guidance on what content LoRs should include (which would be available from your COM's career development center, student services department, advisors or other designated entity).

Upon receiving this response to your LoR request, it is important to consider that perhaps the individual you've asked doesn't have the time to dedicate to writing a LoR, doesn't feel comfortable writing a strongly positive LoR or doesn't have experience writing LoRs.

Should you receive this response because the writer lacks experience in writing LoRs, it would be advisable to provide them with source-based guidance on what content LoRs should include (available from your COM's career development center, student services department, advisors or other designated entity). Furthermore, perhaps providing them with a list of your accomplishments, a list of what you think your best attributes are, a copy of your CV and a copy of your personal statement to review would help them get started.