

# Frequently Asked Questions, Tips, and Perspectives: Writing a Standardized Letter of Recommendation in Psychiatry

## **How is a Standardized Letter of Recommendation (SLOR) different from a Standardized letter of Evaluation?**

A standardized letter of recommendation is intended to highlight specific student strengths within a uniform template. A standardized letter of evaluation is intended to evaluate students compared to peers and may be more comprehensive and less strengths focus.

## **Is the SLOR mandatory for psychiatry?**

While the SLOR is not mandatory, applicants are encouraged to identify one or more letter writers to use the SLOR template. The template is designed to ensure letter writers are commenting on attributes most important to program directors (Russo, 2022).

## **What ongoing evaluation is being done to determine the outcomes of SLOR use?**

Ongoing feedback on SLOR effectiveness and usability is being sought from students, letter writers, and residency program directors. Please sign up if you would be willing to provide feedback: <https://forms.office.com/r/u1Ktg01XdL> [forms.office.com]

The SLOR will certainly be imperfect in these first iterations, but, like Emergency Medicine and other specialties, if we refine our SLOR every year based on feedback from the ADMSEP, AADPRT, and PsychSIGN members, it will increasingly become a more meaningful and helpful part of the application.

## **Are other specialties using standardized letters of recommendation?**

Yes. While Emergency Medicine was the first to standardize their letters of recommendation in the 1990s, many other specialties are following suit. This includes dermatology, internal medicine, med-peds, neurological surgery, obstetrics and gynecology, orthopedic surgery, plastic surgery, and diagnostic radiology.

## **Why can I not put this on my institution's letterhead?**

There is no place to put a formal letterhead on the current template. Some letter writers have shared their preference to copy the PDF text and type it into a Word Document. That way they can add their signature and letterhead. If you choose to transfer into Word or not, remember, that to upload a letter one must sign into the AAMC ERAS LOR portal, which is password protected. This should help ensure the process is secure. We will continue to explore the option to upload letterhead onto the PDF.

**If I select two of the five suggestions for Characteristics and Clinical skills, does that imply they aren't great at the others?** We think the program directors reading the SLORs recognize that most applicants will have strengths in multiple or almost all areas. We recommend

choosing the two characteristics that you most observed or that are most documented spontaneously in the preceptors' narrative comments on the student's clerkship performance. If the SLOR is being used as a Chair letter, we recommend using direct quotes from preceptors where applicable.

### **Why are there character limits?**

The character limits were designed to ensure letter writers stay concise and all students receive the same amount of devoted space. If needed, one option is to compose each narrative section in a Word document, edit, then click Review, and Word Count, to check the character count before copying and pasting back into the SLOR template.

### **Why would anyone comment about extra support that an applicant may need in a letter of recommendation?**

The SLOR does ask for a quality or skill that may be an area of growth for the applicant. We recommend using this area to describe an area for future growth the student seeks, e.g., more exposure to a specific subspecialty of interest or a robust psychotherapy training program. The SLOR also asks *"how much guidance this applicant may need as they begin residency in comparison to their peers."* One approach to this is to quote if any, relevant comments from the clerkship preceptors regarding the level of supervision the student required. Most comments are quite positive; if the student struggled during the psychiatry clerkship and needed undue supervision, then Psychiatry may not be the best specialty choice for them.

### **Will the SLOR take longer to write?**

Initially, writing letters in the SLOR format may have a learning curve. We are hopeful that with increased experience using the SLOR, the new format will not require additional time. One goal of the SLOR is to prompt the letter writer to think more clearly about each candidate's specific strengths and goals, making this input more meaningful.

### **How will the SLOR apply to "chair letters"?**

Generally, the chair will know the preceptors and sites well and may have met with and mentored students. Though they may not have worked directly with the individual student on clinical services, the letter writer should have access to their grades, professionalism, and preceptor feedback. The student should indicate when they request the ERAS upload document that your letter is from the "Chair." When you get the ERAS upload document, you can check two boxes: one to confirm you are providing a letter as "Chair" and one to document that you are submitting a SLOR.

Russo, R. A., Hameed, U., Ibrahim, Y., Joshi, A., Kerlek, A. J., Klapheke, M., Kovach, J. G., Raml, D. M., Schatte, D., Thomas, L. A., & Rakofsky, J. J. (2022). Psychiatry Residency Directors' Attitudes Toward and Uses of the Medical Student Performance Evaluation and Other Potential Tools for Residency Selection. *Academic psychiatry: the journal of the American Association of Directors of Psychiatric Residency Training and the Association for Academic Psychiatry*, 46(5), 622–626.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40596-022-01636-x>