



Tips on Choosing Referees and Having Strong References

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Many medical schools require one academic referee, one non-academic referee, and one of your choosing. As a result, it's important to check the requirements for each school you are applying to. Schools may also differ in their letter format. For instance, some prefer phone calls with the referee, others require that referees write their own recommendation letter, while some have a standardized form, such as the CAF (confidential assessment form).

Tip 1: Select referees that can share different parts about you.

References are another way for medical schools to get to know you and it's great if the referees together can paint a wholistic picture of you and highlight how you've demonstrated different CanMEDS roles. Your academic referee can showcase you in an academic setting, while your non-academic referee can explain your interests, hobbies, and personality outside of academics.

Tip 2: When possible, choose referees that have known you longer than a few months and can write about you beyond surface-level interactions.

This can be more challenging throughout the pandemic. I found it difficult to choose an academic referee because I was mainly enrolled in large classes. I ended up choosing a research supervisor with whom I conducted online research and did not have a lot of in-person interactions. Most of my interactions were with a graduate student instead of the supervisor. As such, I asked the graduate student to provide their input which helped my supervisor write my reference. The consensus I've heard is that choosing professors or supervisors with an academic position at a university as your referee is more favourable than selecting graduate students. However, it is acceptable for graduate students to assist in the writing process.

Tip 3: When asking your referees to write the reference, it's helpful to attach a list of things you want them to mention – this helps strengthen your letter.

You should be very specific when describing events and your role or interaction with your referee. You can organize your list in point form for the referee to quickly read through and sort the points by different CanMEDS roles to ensure that they are all covered across your various references.

Tip 4: Consider the timeliness of your referees, for instance, how fast they respond to emails.

Generally, it's a good idea to provide referees at least 1 month to write the references, but if you know your referee tends to take longer to respond, you can add in buffer time. Also send reminders or check in with your referee closer to the deadline if the reference is unfinished. It can be stressful to balance not wanting to bother the referee with too many reminders and having the referee forget about the reference and miss the deadline. Personally, I let my referees know beforehand that I would send reminder emails 2 weeks and 1 week before the reference deadline.

