Quality Counts: Writing Meaningful References

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Whether you're new to precepting or a seasoned preceptor, it is likely that one of your learners will eventually ask, "Will you be a positive reference for me when I apply to residency programs?" And then you might wonder, "How can I make my reference especially meaningful?"

References and the Full Residency Application

It is important to first understand how references fit into the full residency application. The residency application consists of several standardized components, including the candidate's letter of intent, curriculum vitae (CV), transcripts, and three references. These components are submitted through a web-based tool, Pharmacy Online Residency Centralized Application Service (PhORCAS). PhORCAS uses three portals to streamline each candidate's residency application components. Reference writers submit their reference for a candidate by completing and submitting a standardized reference form through the reference portal, accessed through an individualized sign-in code. If the candidate applies to multiple programs, reference writers have the option to customize their comments for each program to which the candidate applies. Candidates submit other application components and specify which programs they are applying to through an application portal. Each program receives access to a collated file of application documents for each candidate who selected to apply to their program through the program portal, known as WebAdMIT.[1]

Components of a Residency Reference

Prior to the introduction of PhORCAS, submission of residency application components was not streamlined, and reference writers submitted written letters directly to program directors. Available literature questioned the benefit of reference letters.[2] After PhORCAS was introduced in 2012, reference letters were transitioned to a standardized reference form and reference letters were phased out.

The current PhORCAS standardized reference form includes four main sections[3]:
- Recommender demographics
- Characteristics
- Narrative comments
- Recommendation concerning admission

The *recommender demographics* section collects information regarding the reference writer's relationship with the candidate. In the *characteristics* section, the reference writer evaluates the candidate in certain characteristics (such as organization/time management, clinical problem solving skills, and professionalism) using a rating scale (exceeds, appropriate, fails to meet, or N/A). This section also includes space for reference writers to include additional free-text comments. The *narrative comments* section includes space for the reference writer to use free-text responses to describe the nature of their interaction with the candidate, two strengths, two areas for improvement, other characteristics/observations not otherwise addressed about the candidate, and program-specific comments. Finally, the *recommendation concerning admission* section requires the reference writer to select a final recommendation from a list of options: highly recommend, recommend, recommend with reservation(s), or do not recommend.

In addition to using a combination of rating scale assessments and free-text comments to complete the form, reference writers have the option to customize their comments for each program to which the candidate applies.[1] The full PhORCAS standardized reference form can be accessed on the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) website.[3]

Value of References to Reviewers

References provide the reviewer with an important perspective of the candidate.[4-5] The reviewer can take each reference's perspective into consideration to help differentiate the candidate from other applicants and to gain a broader representation of the candidate. The reviewer can also use the provided information to assess whether the candidate's skills, characteristics, behaviors, strengths, and weaknesses align with their residency program.

"Positive" versus "Meaningful" References

Because a reference can influence whether the candidate secures an interview, references are considered an important component of the residency application. Residency candidates are often encouraged to seek reference writers who are willing to provide a "positive" or a "strong" reference.[4] Reference writers recognize the importance of references in the residency application and often feel pressure to provide a reference that[5]:
- Is overly positive
- Inflates strengths
- Minimizes/veils weaknesses
- Is an inaccurate portrayal of the candidate

Unfortunately, references with the above characteristics paint a flawed picture of the candidate, and thus are not meaningful.[5] Reviewers might disregard references that do not appear to contain an accurate representation of the candidate or that do not contain enough specific details about the candidate. Ultimately, these "positive" types of references might negatively impact the candidate's application and the chance of securing an interview.

In order to be considered valuable

to reviewers, the reference must contain details that are meaningful. Meaningful references contain[5]:

- An objective/honest assessment
- Specific statements about strengths/areas for improvement
- Context/examples
- Strengths not over-inflated
- Areas for improvement not "disguised"

Research published in 2020 examined nearly 6,000 PhORCAS references submitted to four PGY1 pharmacy residency programs. The authors found minimal correlation between reference writers' ratings of characteristics in PhORCAS with application score, applicant ranking, and invitation to interview. This study supports that a "positive" reference without meaningful content is not valuable to the reviewer.[6]

Unpublished data further supports these considerations. The area for improvement response within the PhORCAS narrative comment section was examined for a pool of over 600 submitted residency references. The three most frequent responses were "confidence," "clinical knowledge," and either "none" or left blank. Reviewers noted a lack of specific examples in the associated supporting or free-text comment sections. Because these responses were so broad, the reviewers believe that specific wording or examples would have been more impactful.[7]

Avoiding Pitfalls

When writing a reference, it is critical to avoid the pitfalls that result in an inaccurate portrayal of the candidate. Instead:

1. Ensure your reference is objective and honest. *Is the student truly "the best student you've ever precepted"? Does the student really have no areas for improvement?*
2. Include supporting comments that are specific, provide context, and include examples. *Is the strength/area for improvement specific rather than generic? What unique perspective are you providing? (supporting context) What activities did you observe that should be highlighted? (examples)*
3. Make sure your ratings (exceeds/appropriate/fails to meet; and highly recommend/recommend/recommend with reservation) match your supporting comments.

In order to highlight the important differences between a positive reference and a meaningful reference, let's consider the following example. An APPE learner we'll call "AL" completed her first acute care experience on your internal medicine rotation in August. Because of her experience on your rotation, AL decided to pursue PGY1 pharmacy residency training and asked you to be a reference. When assessing AL's clinical problem solving skills in your reference, you state *"AL could continue to improve her clinical knowledge,*

and residency training will provide AL the environment to do this."

A more meaningful assessment would:

- Be specific: *"AL could improve independently applying clinical knowledge to patient care plans.;"*
- Include your unique perspective as supporting context: *"AL's baseline clinical knowledge was initially weaker than the other APPE student on rotation.;"*
- Highlight activities you observed as examples: *"AL recognized this weakness, so she independently came in early to prepare and reviewed disease states on her own time. By the end of the rotation, she strengthened her clinical knowledge base and was applying it to patient care plans with preceptor guidance."*

Strategies for Writing a Meaningful Reference

One strategy for facilitating the inclusion of specific overall impressions and supporting examples is to use a tool to organize your interactions with potential candidates. It is recommended to use the tool for all learners, because you might be surprised by who might ask you to be a reference. For their tool, the authors created a spreadsheet based on the PhORCAS standardized recommendation form. This "reference intake tool" includes a worksheet

FIGURE 1. Reference Intake Tool—Characteristics Section

Student Name:		
Date of Rotation:		
Rotation Type:		
College of Pharmacy:		

Characteristics	Ratings	Comments
Writing skills (clincial, email and assigned writings)	Exceeds	
Oral communication skills	Exceeds	
Leadership/mentoring skills	Exceeds	
Assertiveness	Exceeds	
Ability to organize and manage time	Exceeds	
Ability to work with peers and communicate effectively	Exceeds	
Clinical problem solving skills	Exceeds	
Effective patient interactions	Exceeds	
Dependability	Exceeds	
Independence and resourcefulness	Exceeds	
Willingness to accept constructive cristism	Exceeds	
Emotional stabilty and maturity	Exceeds	
Professionalism (professional attire and professional demeanor)	Exceeds	

Please describe the nature of your interaction with the candidate.
Under a period of normal workload or abnormal?
What frequency or number of directly observed clinical activites of the candidate?
The degree of independence the candidate was given?
Was that independece reduced or increased over the duration of a rotation?
How did the candidate's skills compare with (in order of preference) concurrent residents, peer students or students from other colleges?

FIGURE 2. Reference Intake Tool—Narrative Comments Section

Two strengths of this candidate and how you believe these strengths will be beneficial to his/her success in a residency program.

1.

2.

Two areas for improvement of this candidate and how you believe a residency program will be able to work with the candidate's noted areas for improvement

1.

2.

Any other characteristics or observances of this candidate not mentioned previously. In comparison to all students in the last two years, the candidate ranks:

Recommendation	Highly Recommend

| Student 1 Name | Student 2 Name | Student 3 Name | Tips Sheet | ⊕ |

for each student with drop-down boxes for ratings and space for supporting comments (Figures 1 and 2). The tool is completed after interacting with each learner, and helps the user track objective assessments and specific examples that can later be used within the reference. This is especially helpful because a significant amount of time could pass before the reference is needed, and once asked, the turnaround time to submit the reference is short. The authors further customized their tool to include an internal "bank" of potential specific phrasing options (Figure 3).

In addition, when asked to be a reference, many writers find it helpful to ask the candidate for further information about the position(s). Details including what attracted the candidate to the position and how the candidate feels the position will help meet their professional goals gives the reference writer context. This context can help the reference writer tailor examples, which enhances the reference.[4]

References for Post-Graduate Year Two (PGY2) Positions or Jobs

The concepts described above can also be applied when serving as a reference for a candidate applying for a PGY2 position or a job. Unless the position is being offered through the Early Commitment Process[8], PGY2 positions utilize the same application process and PhORCAS standardized recommendation form described above. Similarly, employers typically use a standardized reference process that includes a combination of ratings and free-text comments during the hiring process. Within residency programs specifically, candidates for PGY2 programs are expected to be performing at a higher level of practice than candidates for PGY1 programs. Although certain characteristics can be of differing importance based on the position, the importance of an accurate and meaningful reference remains constant.

Saying "no" to Serving as a Reference

In some situations, the best response to, "Will you be a positive reference for me?" is to decline the request. Consider saying no to serving as a reference for a candidate when:

- you do not know the candidate well enough to provide a meaning reference
- you know you cannot allocate the time necessary to provide a

meaningful reference
- your honest assessment would not benefit the candidate

If you decide to decline, it is important to respond to the candidate quickly to allow them time to ask others. Briefly including your reason can be constructive to the candidate.

Key Takeaways

Now when you are asked, "Will you be a positive reference for me when I apply to residency programs?" you no longer need to wonder how to make your reference more meaningful. Instead, remember three simple takeaways:

1. Be honest, specific, and include context/examples. Do not over-inflate strengths or disguise weaknesses.
2. Have a plan to manage reference requests—develop a system to keep track of your impressions.
3. Set your goal to highlight realistic strengths and areas for improvement rather than "getting the candidate an interview."

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FIGURE 3. Reference Intake Tool with Added Specific Phrasing Options

Student Name:		
Date of Rotation:		
Rotation Type:		
College of Pharmacy:		
Characteristics	Ratings	Examples of specific phrasing (customize to your own preferences, could be positive or constructive, include context)
Writing skills (clincial, email and assigned writings)	Exceeds	needs improvement in their technical writing, uses abbreviations in communication
Oral communication skills	Exceeds	needs to speak clearly, needs to be able to get to the point, gets nervous when speaking, speaks softly
Leadership/mentoring skills	Exceeds	difficulty taking ownership of an assisgnment, needs to be more creative "think outside the box", difficulty considering other points of view, difficulty speaking up in a group
Assertiveness	Exceeds	needs to speak up on rounds, needs to move out of comfort zone, needs to be more engaged in group settings
Ability to organize and manage time	Exceeds	lack of motivation, not being organized, unable to prioritize, difficulty multitasking, does not meet deadlines
Ability to work with peers and communicate effectively	Exceeds	needs to volunteer for assignments, doesn't pull their weight within a team, needs to let others participate in discussion, difficulty in a team when they are not the lead
Clinical problem solving skills	Exceeds	knows EBL but needs to apply it to patients, application of the clinical knowledge, gets caught up in the details/overthinks, hard time seeing the big picture
Effective patient interactions	Exceeds	needs to use emotional intelligence, needs to show more empathy, needs to let the patients speak, needs to enhance their cultural competence, respect patient time
Dependability	Exceeds	had to follow up on their assignements, didn't complete all assignments, work meets expectations but does not exceed
Independence and resourcefulness	Exceeds	learn to use resources available in order to be more independent, needs to ask for more feedback (but takes it well), is too independent- needs to know when to ask for guidance, expects to be "spoon-fed"
Willingness to accept constructive cristism	Exceeds	gets defensive, makes excuses, open to feedback but does not incorporate it into practice
Emotional stability and maturity	Exceeds	gets frustrated, sarcastic, overly emotional, needs to learn how to accurately self-reflect, too hard on themselves
Professionalism (professional attire and professional demeanor)	Exceeds	needs to control non-verbal, flat affect – comes across laid back, needs to take initative instead of waiting for instruction