

MEDLIFE MASTERY

# YOUR COMPLETE LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION CHECKLIST

Everything you need to secure strong letters that make  
your medical school application stand out.

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## 1 — Before You Ask: Know What You Need

Your letters are third-party verification of your personal statement. Before approaching anyone, get clear on the story you want your application to tell.

### Define what you want each letter to say about you

Work ethic? Academic resilience? Compassion? Leadership? Each letter should highlight a different strength. Decide your "themes" before you approach anyone.

### Identify 3–5 people in each required category

Cast a wide net first. You'll narrow down later, but start broad so you have options.

- 2 science professors
- 1 non-science professor
- Physician / healthcare professional
- Volunteer coordinator / employer
- Research supervisor (if applicable)
- DO physician (if applying to DO schools)

### Narrow to 2 per category based on relationship strength

Who knows you best? A strong letter from someone who truly knows you beats a lukewarm letter from a big name.

### Plan to ask 8–10 people total

Expect ~7 to follow through. You'll submit 4–5 per school. Having extras means one flaky writer won't derail your entire application.

### Research each school's specific letter requirements

Some schools accept up to 13 letters, others cap at 3. Some require specific types (e.g., clinical, research).

#### PRO TIP

It's not who you know — it's who knows *you*. Two phenomenal letters from people who genuinely know you will always outperform five generic ones from impressive titles.

## 2 — Prepare Your Recommendation Request Letter

Never show up empty-handed. A written request shows professionalism and makes it easier for your writer to say yes.

### Remind them how they know you

"I was in your Bio 102 class, Fall 2024" — professors may have hundreds of students. Jog their memory.

### Highlight the specific qualities you want them to address

"I feel my growth in your course, raising my grade from a B- to an A-, could speak to my work ethic." Give them direction without scripting the letter.

### Briefly share who you are as an applicant

1–2 sentences about why you're pursuing medicine and which schools you're targeting.

### Include clear submission instructions

AMCAS? Pre-health committee? Interfolio? If they don't know where to send it, the letter won't get there.

**Set a soft deadline 1–2 months before you actually need it**

This gives you a buffer when (not if) someone runs late. Give them at least 4–6 weeks to write.

**Emphasize: the letter should be about *you*, not the experience**

You want them to describe your character, skills, and growth – not a description of the volunteer project.

### 3 — Make the Ask

Whether in person, by phone, or by email – there's a right way to ask.

**Set up an in-person meeting or phone call when possible**

Face-to-face reminders of who you are rekindle memories and strengthen the letter.

**Ask for a *strong* letter of recommendation**

The word "strong" is critical. It gives them an honest out if they can't deliver – and a lukewarm letter is worse than no letter at all.

**Gauge their response – hesitation is a red flag**

If they seem reluctant, thank them and move on. An enthusiastic writer produces a letter that admissions committees can feel.

**Ask: "What information can I provide to help you write the letter?"**

CV, transcript, personal statement – get them whatever they need, quickly. Then follow up with a thank-you email.

#### EMAIL VS. IN-PERSON

Email works best when you already have an email relationship with the professor. If they'd only recognize your face, go in person. Know your audience and play to your strengths.

### 4 — Follow Up Like a Professional

Most professors need reminders. It's not annoying – it's expected and appreciated.

**Send courtesy reminder #1: 2–3 weeks before your soft deadline**

A brief, warm email thanking them and gently noting the upcoming date.

**Send courtesy reminder #2: 1 week before the deadline**

Restate the deadline. Express gratitude. Keep it short.

**Send a final nudge on the deadline date if needed**

Emphasize the importance for your medical school applications. Stay professional.

**Know when to let go**

If consistently unresponsive, send a courteous "I won't be needing your letter" email and move on.

**Write a genuine thank-you note after the letter is submitted**

Gratitude goes a long way — for you, and for every student who asks this professor after you.

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## 5 — Letter Theme Guide

Assign each writer a theme so your letters form a cohesive, complete picture — not five letters that all say the same thing.

 **Personal Growth & Potential**

Emphasizes your ability to learn, adapt, and grow. Ideal for a professor who saw you improve over time.

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 **Scholarly & Intellectual Ability**

Highlights your academic curiosity, scientific thinking, and rigor. Best from a research mentor or challenging course professor.

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 **Professionalism & Maturity**

Demonstrates your reliability, responsibility, and professional demeanor. Strong from an employer or volunteer coordinator.

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 **Clinical Experience & Patient Care**

Shows your comfort with patients and understanding of healthcare. Ideal from a supervising physician.

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 **X-Factor — What Makes You Unique**

Something distinctive — a standout achievement, an unusual perspective, a defining moment.

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### REMEMBER

Never force a theme on a writer. Match themes to your natural relationship with each person. If a professor knows your work ethic, don't ask them to write about your clinical experience.

## 6 — Your LOR Timeline

Work backwards from your application submission date.

**6+ MONTHS OUT**      **Build relationships.** Attend office hours, engage in class, volunteer consistently.

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**3-4 MONTHS OUT**      **Make your list.** Identify 3-5 people per category. Research school requirements.

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**2.5-3 MONTHS OUT**      **Prepare request materials.** Write your Request Letter. Gather CV, transcript, personal statement.

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**~3 MONTHS OUT**      **Make the ask.** Schedule meetings. Request strong letters. Set your soft deadline.

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**6 WEEKS OUT**      **Check in.** Confirm writers have everything they need.

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**2-3 WEEKS OUT**      **Reminder #1.** Thank them and note the upcoming deadline.

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**1 WEEK OUT**      **Reminder #2.** Restate the date. Keep it brief.

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**DEADLINE DAY**      **Final check.** Follow up if needed. Activate backup writers if necessary.

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**AFTER SUBMISSION**      **Send thank-you notes.** Express genuine gratitude to every writer.

## 7 — Pre-Med Committee Checklist

If your school has a pre-health committee, you have extra steps.

**Research how your committee writes their letter**

Some compile individual letters into a packet. Others write their own based on grades, MCAT, and an interview.

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**Build a relationship with your pre-health advisor**

This person can be your greatest advocate or a bureaucratic bottleneck. Get to know them genuinely.

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**Check if schools require a committee letter**

Most medical schools prefer committee letters if available. Not submitting one raises questions.

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**Adjust your timeline — committee letters take longer**

You may need MCAT scores or prerequisites completed before the committee will write. Start even earlier.