

Best Practices for Writing a Promotion Letter of Recommendation (LOR)

DOM Faculty Development

1. What essentials from a candidate's promotion materials should I highlight?

The most impactful contribution is to place the applicant's work into perspective by explaining their impact on the institution and beyond. If you are a content expert, explain the significance of their work to non-experts. Fill in gaps in the CV/Portfolio, highlighting areas the candidate may not have emphasized enough. Synthesize the candidate's impact with a few key examples — for instance, don't list all 30 committees; instead say "they are on 30 committees, including..." and highlight the most prestigious or impactful ones.

- Highlight the candidate's contributions and impact beyond their department
- Provide context about committee roles, especially leadership roles
- Explain academic awards to non-experts
- For Research: describe the impact on knowledge, publications, independent investigator status, and/or your firsthand knowledge of their role in collaborative projects
- For Education: describe national impact, mentorship, and curricula. Internal letter writers should describe new courses and educational activities developed, and curriculum development involvement (especially important for promotion to Professor)
- For Service: describe new service lines, referrals from outside the institution, innovation in clinical practice, and local committee leadership. If the candidate established a new service, include your firsthand knowledge and the importance of that service for the institution

Internal Letters

Written by colleagues who know the candidate well and can speak to their contributions to the institution beyond their department. An important aspect of internal letters is speaking to the candidate's collegiality — include specific behaviors you have observed that demonstrate this. This is particularly important for the Award of Tenure.

External Letters

Written by faculty who may not know the candidate at all. Include a statement about the candidate's potential for promotion or tenure at your home institution. Read the request carefully, as different institutions have different expectations and "arm's length criteria." State in your letter that you have read the institutional criteria, and whether you are (or are not) recommending promotion/tenure based on those criteria.

2. Do I need to comment on all 3 mission areas?

Yes — comment on all 3 mission areas: **Education, Service, and Research.**

Even if the candidate only needs to demonstrate excellence in 1 or 2 areas (tenure or non-tenure earning), promotion criteria require activity in all 3 areas. Some candidates may also

have important strengths in more than one category, and highlighting all of them can only help their application.

3. How should the LOR be structured?

Structure the letter to align with the promotion criteria. Consider developing a personal template you can modify for each candidate. A recommended structure:

- Opening: Brief, concise discussion of your qualifications as a letter writer, including your academic rank and tenure status
- Overview: A brief synopsis of the candidate's background and proposed areas of excellence
- Body paragraphs: One paragraph per area of excellence — start with the area(s) used for promotion/tenure purposes, then move to others
- Scope: Describe contributions in order — local, then regional, then national/international impact

4. How long should a LOR be?

In general, internal and external letters should be **1.5–3 pages, with 2 pages being ideal**.

- Too short: gives the impression the reviewer didn't adequately review the materials — can be detrimental to the candidate
- Too long: burdens the committee reviewers

5. Can Artificial Intelligence (AI) be used to write a LOR?

Your personal evaluation is key — **AI should not be used to write a LOR**.

There may be limited use for AI to help organize or summarize key accomplishments from the candidate's CV or portfolio. However:

- AI-generated content can be unreliable and must be carefully verified
- If AI is used in any part of the process, use only a secure, UAB enterprise-protected version
- Obvious differences in writing style between AI-generated and author-written paragraphs will reflect poorly on the letter and could hurt the applicant's chances

6. What are the common mistakes or missed opportunities in LORs?

Avoid the following pitfalls:

- Using generic templates without proper personalization
- Using excessive or inappropriate superlatives, or the same superlatives in multiple letters reviewed by the same committee
- Typos, pronoun mismatches, or name errors — these suggest the author doesn't know the candidate or didn't proofread their template
- Omitting or including incorrect details about the area(s) of excellence, promotion rank, or tenure/non-tenure earning track — all details about specific rank and/or award of tenure must be accurate

- Omitting the letter writer's rank/tenure status, or missing institutional letterhead
- Missing the statement about whether the candidate is likely to be promoted at your institution (required for external letters)

If you cannot fully support a candidate, communicate this to the individual or the department chair. Do not write a letter for a candidate you cannot strongly endorse.