

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# Letters of Recommendation for Application to Veterinary College

**Author's Note:** *The following does not necessarily represent the opinions or recommendations of the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC), the Veterinary Medical College Application Service (VMCAS), the application process of colleges or schools outside the VMCAS system, or of the institution where I am employed (Cornell University). The opinions are solely those of the author on this date (August 22, 2013).*

By Dr. Donald F. Smith  
August 22, 2013

It is the season in which hopeful future veterinarians are completing their VMCAS applications for next fall's matriculation into the Class of 2018.<sup>1</sup> Besides the personal statement (essay) and summaries of academic and work experiences, the most important aspect of the application is letters of evaluation from mentors, work supervisors, and current and former teachers.

Selecting the right people to write your reference letters is the most important decision you will make in assuring the letters the colleges receive present you in the most accurate light. The people you ask to write letters should:

- Know you and your work. Avoid having a well-known person, such as legislator or dean write your letter unless they know your accomplishments well.
- Be well-known in the professional community. A good rule of thumb is to ask the most prominent and respected people you know *who also know you well*.
- Not be too familiar personally. Avoid accepting offers of letters from family members, neighbors and clergy unless specifically requested by the institution. This applies even when your family member is a veterinarian.
- Be responsive, reliable, and prompt in writing the reference letter.
- Provide an articulate, factual, and concisely-written reference, avoiding hyperbole or exaggeration.
- Make your letter unique to you and your circumstances. This is especially important because the VMCAS format does not provide opportunity for the evaluator to make comments that are germane to specific colleges to which you are applying.
- Be sufficiently familiar with computing to be able to navigate the required process for on-line letters of evaluation.

The reference letter should contain at least five parts, usually in the following order:

1. Description of how long the reviewer has known you, and under what circumstances.
2. If a working situation, the letter should describe your employment responsibilities, and how your work has progressed as you have gained experience and competence.
3. Description of your attributes, including both technical and personal qualities, in specific terms to your situation. Letters with platitudes and non-specific descriptions are unhelpful in distinguishing you from other candidates.
4. Narrative of your technical competence, personal and professional qualities, creativity, intellectual stimulation, and progress in your work or studies.
5. Comparison of your suitability for the position with other candidates previously evaluated. Though this is actually part of the VMCAS form, it is often helpful to elaborate on this aspect in the letter.

You should determine ahead of time if your evaluator has concerns about recommending you. At an early stage in the process, meet with your prospective evaluator and inquire if they feel comfortable providing a highly supportive letter. Because some reviewers may have a hard time acknowledging their concerns to you directly, you should frame your question in a manner that allows them to express lack of enthusiasm or other possible clues to their lack of full support. The question may be worded such as, "Have you seen qualities in other candidates you have endorsed that you don't see in me?"

After you decide to request a letter, provide your resume and a series of bullet points outlining those experiences and attributes that you feel might be helpful for your application. Remember that most reviewers will be writing letters for several applicants and specific information or reminders you provide will likely be appreciated.

Except in the most unusual circumstances, waive your right to see the letter. Failure to waive your right of confidentiality may mean that the letter will not be taken seriously. Since this represents a red flag to some reviewers, it may even be damaging to your application.

It is ultimately your responsibility to ensure that the letter is received by the deadline. It is sometimes best to discuss this with your evaluator early in the process. Rather than just say that the letter is due on such-and-such a date, be more specific by asking when you may expect to receive notice that the letter has been received and mutually determine a process for reminder if that schedule is not met.

Be sure to thank your evaluator (a hand-written note is often the best) and follow up with the person again when you know the outcome of the application. Many times, supporters are almost as happy and fulfilled as you are and will consider that they were an important factor in your admission. I know people who proudly recount for many years the veterinarians they mentored and assisted with their letters of application.

If you do not get accepted, feel free to follow up with both your evaluator and the institution. To inquire specifically about the contents of a letter is unprofessional and may even imply a breach of ethical judgment. You can, however, ask both parties if there is anything you could do regarding your evaluations to improve your chances in a subsequent year.

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<sup>1</sup> Check the VMCAS (Veterinary Medical College Application Service) site for requirements, deadlines and other information relative to application services.

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Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.