



# The ADVICER Template for Faculty Reviewer Letters for Promotion and Appointment

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**Rationale and Objectives:** Promotion is an important milestone in the career of academic radiologists. Appointments, Promotion and Tenure (APT) committees require multiple letters of support from both internal and external referees. Traditional narrative letters are highly subjective, have high inter-reader variability, are time-intensive, and vulnerable to gender and other biases. The Alliance of Directors and Vice Chairs of Education in Radiology (ADVICER) recognized the need for a standardized template to assist academic faculty, letter writers, and APT committees.

**Materials and Methods:** An ADVICER *ad hoc* committee of six educators with experience serving as external referees was convened to create a standardized template. Committee members performed a search of the relevant literature and internet sites, spoke with stakeholders such as APT chairs, and ultimately developed a template for faculty reviewer letters using the common clinician-educator pathway as a focal point.

**Results:** An open source, modifiable, standardized, template was produced. The template has been made available to ADVICER members and is available on the Association of University Radiologists (AUR) website at: <https://www.aur.org/resources/Template-for-Faculty-Reviewer-Letters-for-Promotion-and-Appointment>

**Conclusion:** This external referee template has the potential to reduce subjectivity, eliminate bias, and provide a flexible, modifiable, comprehensive faculty review letter template which will be useful for academic faculty, letter writers, and promotions committees.

**Key Words:** Promotion; Education; Letter of Reference; Radiology.

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**Abbreviations:** **APT** Appointments Promotion and Tenure, **ADVICER** Alliance of Directors and Vice Chairs of Education in Radiology, **AUR** Association of University Radiologists, **CV** curriculum vitae, **SLOR** standardized letter of recommendation

## INTRODUCTION

A recent paper from Jhala et al. identified the increasing presence of the Clinician-Educator (or similar) track as a promotion option at academic institutions (1). This is a track that many non-research faculty in Radiology

departments will likely pursue. Appointments, Promotions and Tenure (APT) tracks and qualifying criteria vary between institutions as detailed in that paper, but all require some number of outside (and often intra-institutional) review letters. These letters compose a key component of the faculty portfolio and are based on information supplied to the reviewers in some combination of: faculty curriculum vitae (CV); educational portfolios; selected publications; evaluations from learners, and personal statements from the candidate. The reviewer may know the candidate, but close colleagues are usually excluded. Reviewers are typically at, or above, the academic rank being applied for (so typically Associate and Full Professors). They may be selected by the departmental chair, the departmental promotions committee chair, and/or the candidate. Like many academic tasks, review letter writing is not taught to faculty and guidance from the requesting institution may be limited. Writing these letters is challenging and fraught with the potential for bias (1–3). The material supplied to reviewers can be extensive, vary in format between institutions and difficult to collate and summarize cohesively. In general, APT committees do not

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want a rehash of the candidate's CV and are usually interested in the reviewer's perceived impact of the candidate's work at the local, regional, national, and international levels (4).

Standardizing the reviewer letters for promotion and appointment provides guidance to reviewers as to the key components important to APT committees and improves clarity, transparency, and efficiency of the process. This report presents a template that can be modified for the variable promotion tracks at different institutions. It is meant to be used in conjunction with the supplied promotion criteria from the specific institution requesting the letter.

## METHODS

An ADVICER *ad hoc* committee was assembled for the purposes of constructing a template for faculty reviewer letters for promotion and appointment. The committee was composed of six members of the organization (3 female and 3 male), representing different institutions and areas of subspecialty within radiology. All committee members serve as Vice Chairs of Education in their respective departments at the academic rank of Professor. In addition, all members have extensive experience writing letters for promotion and appointment. Five members currently or previously served on their department's APT committee. One member has been on their institutional APT committee. The committee convened through a series of working meetings as well as through electronic communication over the course of 12 months. A search of the relevant literature related to standardized letters of reference and promotion was conducted. In addition, a review of pertinent internet sites was performed with regards to APT committees and promotion pathways. Members of the committee spoke with stakeholders such as APT chairs. A template for faculty reviewer letters using the common clinician-educator pathway as a focal point was ultimately developed. Based on the results, the goals of the template development identified were:

1. Provide a flexible, modifiable, comprehensive faculty review letter template
2. Provide guidance to reviewers as to the key components important to APT committees
3. Simplify, focus, and standardize the review process
4. Reduce inter-reviewer and intra-reviewer subjectivity
5. Reduce the potential use of gender or racially biased adjectives and/or criteria
6. Provide APT committees with an easy to interpret format.

## RESULTS

An open source, modifiable, standardized, fillable template was produced. The template has been deployed to ADVICER members and is available on the Association of University Radiologists (AUR) website at: <https://www.aur.org/resources/Template-for-Faculty-Reviewer-Letters-for->

**Promotion-and-Appointment.** An instructional guide is provided with the template and should be deleted before submission.

Using the clinician-educator pathway as a model, promotional criteria were divided between four areas: educational, clinical, scholarly, and leadership/service/administrative activities (1). A Microsoft Word (Microsoft, Redmond, WA) form was used as the delivery format, with versions for both Windows and Mac users. The form uses a combination of color-coded free text fields and drop-down selectable options. Within each of the 4 areas, potential scholarly productivity specific components were identified that included: 1) scope of impact (eg, departmental, medical school, institution, regional, national, international, community); 2) identified key activities in specific fields (eg, awards, committee products, leadership roles, program development, leadership); 3) perceived impact of the faculty in this area at institutional, regional, national and international levels (minimal, good, excellent, outstanding); 4) identified areas of weakness and 5) overall perceived ranking of this candidate compared to similar candidates.

The option of adding quantitative metrics to the scholarly activity section is included, such as numbers of publications in specific categories and citations. To be as inclusive (of all potential activities) as possible, specific fields were included for a number of 'non-traditional' activities such as mentorship, educational workshops, educational social media, digital media, quality improvement and public advocacy. It is understood that not all promotions committees recognize these areas as being part of a clinician educator's portfolio, but some may and by including them we hope that it will help propagate recognition in future.

## DISCUSSION

Promotion is an important milestone in the career of academic radiologists. It is a celebration of sustained scholarship and contribution to the mission of the organization as well as an expectation of continued success (5). This recognition is both "symbolic" and "practical" (6). In many instances, promotion, eg, from assistant to associate professor or associate professor to (full) professor, brings additional salary and benefits (7). In general, a national reputation is often needed for promotion to full professor. (6,8). One may also wonder about tenure in the modern age (9). In 2009 Buchanan aptly noted that "...in many institutions, a tenured position has little value except for the prestige..." (9). Moreover, in our experience, it is exceedingly rare for a Radiologist to receive tenure. Tenure is also not evident to others in the same way as being an Associate Professor or holding a named Professorship. The "Hierarchy of academic ranks" is nicely, and succinctly, organized into a table in a paper from Buchanan in 2009 and includes the oft-overshadowed "transitional position" (9). The authors also include a tabular description of the "usual criteria for promotion from assistant to associate professor" (9). Although the work is focused on the field of

Hematology (9), it is our opinion that it has relevance to at least the field of Radiology.

Promotion pathways are conceptual frameworks for describing a faculty member's scholarly accomplishments and career progression. Traditional pathways for promotion have stressed research, most commonly reflected by grants and peer-reviewed publications. However, more recently, additional pathways for promotion have emerged that take into account the shifting economics of health care towards clinical productivity. This has led to the development of more clinically oriented promotion tracks such as Clinician-Educator and Clinician-Leader (1,10–12). Curriculum development, academic/teaching portfolios, mentor advising, learner assessments, service, and advocacy are therefore now recognized by many APT committees as important assessments when evaluating candidates (6). Sox and Schuster described additional “non-traditional” criteria that can potentially be used as criteria for promotion such as data sharing, participation in public research registries, and adherence to research reporting guidelines (5). All this information is typically presented to the APT committee in the form of a promotion packet which usually includes the candidate's curriculum vitae, a comprehensive summary that succinctly documents accomplishments, copies of key articles, and letters of support from internal and external referees (9).

The number of internal and external referee letters varies from institution to institution and usually is larger for higher promotional levels, but some authors suggest that a promotion application packet have at least 6 external referee letters (13). In some instances, the committee may also contact additional individuals to ask for their confidential opinion about the candidate (9). Assessments of impact and quality can be elusive and given that there are not well-established metrics for professional evaluations, the written opinions of peers in the form of letters of reference are extremely influential (14). Although there is sparse literature on the weight of letters of reference for promotion, there is considerable evidence about their importance in residency selection. Letters of reference communicate information about an individual's achievements and perhaps more importantly when dealing with residency applicants, their potential for future success (15). The letters can provide information about an applicant that is not found in their curriculum vitae or grades/test scores. The letter of recommendation serves as an endorsement from the letter writer and have been shown to be amongst the most influential portions of an application for a residency/fellowship position (3,16,17).

Despite the importance placed on letters of recommendation, the skill of writing a letter of recommendation is not taught during training (18). Faculty are often not aware of the components of a portfolio that are important to an APT committee. A standardized template guides the writer through the process of identifying and evaluating that information as well guiding candidates in how to develop their own portfolios. Identifying ‘areas of weakness’ (eg, national profile, publication quality and number) in a portfolio within

these letters is also important and provides evidence of the writer's objectivity, thus this has been included in the template. These areas of perceived weakness are usually balanced by other accomplishments. Much of the existing literature on standardized letters of recommendation relate to those for medical students applying for residency. Traditional letters of recommendation, also called narrative letters, are written in prose and therefore highly subjective (15,19). Narrative letters have high inter-reader variability, are time-intensive, and vulnerable to gender bias (2,20). Letter writers are typically selected by the departmental chair or the departmental promotions committee chair and have no conflict of interest in their relationship with the candidate (20). At some institutions however, applicants for promotion can select their letter writers which can introduce an intentional selection bias (3). When investigating letters of reference for otolaryngology residency applicants, Kominsky et al. found a statistically higher score when the letter writer and the applicant were from the same institution (21). As such the letters have potential for being overwhelmingly positive in nature, making it difficult to discriminate between a strong applicant and an average or weak applicant (2,3). Given the shortcomings of narrative letters, several medical and surgical specialties, including radiology, have introduced the use of a standardized letter of recommendation (SLOR) for medical students applying to residency programs (22–24). SLORs have been reported to have better inter-rater reliability and improve efficiency with decrease in the time required to write and interpret the letter (15,16,25,26).

Given that the basic tenets of a letter of recommendation for residency or fellowship training applies to faculty promotion, it would stand to reason that an electronic, standardized template for faculty reviewer letters for promotion and appointment would have the same benefits. One institution created and implemented electronic standardized forms pertinent to each track, rank, and appointment or promotion to increase clarity and transparency (27). The “e-form” provides detailed instructions to external reviewers that ensures letter writers analyze whether a candidate satisfies the relevant criteria for promotion (27). Simply put, a standardized template would allow a letter writer to meet all seven cardinal elements of an exemplary letter of recommendation: 1) authenticity; 2) honesty; 3) explicitness; 4) balance; 5) confidentiality; 6) appropriate detail and length; 7) technically clear (28). We believe that the ADVICER template fulfilled our six initial goals described in the methods section above, although further follow up after it has been deployed and utilized will confirm this. The letter is comprehensive and modifiable and provides a guide to reviewers as to the key components important to APT committees. It certainly standardizes the review process, and in initial testing by authors, simplifies letter writing. All templates, by definition, reduce inter- and intra-reviewer subjectivity. There are no potentially gender or racially biased adjectives used. While these letters may initially seem ‘foreign’ to APT committees, we feel that they are easy to interpret and as yet we have not received complaints or requests for revised letters when the template has been used.

## CONCLUSION

We have developed a prototype, modifiable faculty review template for distribution which we feel will aid both reviewers and APT committees. We would encourage academic faculty to utilize this template and send feedback to the authors to enable further modifications. The template is provided in Appendix A, and is freely available on the AUR/ADVICER website: (<https://www.aur.org/resources/Template-for-Faculty-Reviewer-Letters-for-Promotion-and-Appointment>).

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## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.acra.2021.12.027.