

## COMMENTARY AND PERSPECTIVE

# Promotion and tenure letters: A guide for faculty

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### Abstract

Promotion and tenure (P&T) letters are a key component of the academic advancement portfolio. Despite their importance, many faculty are not trained to write these letters and there is limited literature describing the approach and key components. This paper reviews the role of P&T letters and provides general guidelines for writers. We present a step-by-step guide, which includes how to respond to requests, the role of institutional guidelines, providing context to the letter, evaluating candidates, and delivering an overall recommendation. Finally, we discuss current controversies in P&T letters. This paper is intended to help novice and more experienced writers to enhance their P&T letters, while also helping applicants for promotion understand what is being asked of their letter writers.

## INTRODUCTION

Promotion and tenure (P&T) letters are a key component of academic career advancement. These letters serve as a critical part of the P&T application packet and speak to the candidate's qualifications based on the letter writer's personal experience (i.e., letter of endorsement) or an objective "arm's length" review of the applicant's materials and reputation (i.e., letter of evaluation). It is common for academicians to write multiple P&T letters on behalf of others each year. Writing a letter for promotion takes time, effort, and preparation. While writing letters for promotion offers little recognition, it is an important function for advancement of faculty. This is especially critical for promotion to the rank of professor, because there may be fewer faculty at this rank available to write letters.<sup>1</sup>

While many have experience in writing letters of recommendation for students or trainees, the P&T letter has unique characteristics. Many faculty may not have received specific training or garnered sufficient experience in writing P&T letters before being invited to write one, and feedback is rare. There is a need for guidance for faculty who are called upon to engage with the academic community by reviewing and assessing dossiers for P&T purposes. This resource will introduce novice writers to this skill and help experienced writers provide higher-quality letters. Candidates for academic promotion may also benefit from a summary of what is being asked of their letter writers.

The authors of this paper are experienced P&T letter writers, have held roles on P&T committees, and represent five institutions across two North American countries. Building on our extensive

shared experiences combined with literature support when available, this paper seeks to provide practical guidance for P&T letter writers and information for applicants.

## PROMOTION PROCESS

The processes for promotion vary among institutions. Typically, individual departments will either have departmental P&T committees or appoint a senior faculty member to oversee departmental P&T decisions and processes. This faculty member works closely with the candidate to determine their timeline for promotion; finalize their curriculum vitae, personal statement, and any other required materials; select representative scholarly products; and request letters of support from renowned experts in the field.<sup>2</sup> These materials will then typically be reviewed by the departmental committee (or department chair), who will vote to approve the faculty member's application for promotion to be submitted to the institutional P&T committee.

Institutional P&T committees may be composed of diverse faculty, with variable representation from clinicians, researchers, clinician-educators, basic science faculty, and nonphysician members. Candidate dossiers will be reviewed in depth by one or more members of the committee, who then present the portfolio to the larger committee to determine whether the candidate meets institutional standard-setting criteria for promotion. Titles, academic tracks, and promotion criteria vary among institutions. Most requests will either attach an appendix with the institution-specific titles, tracks, terminology, and promotion criteria or have this information available upon request. Requests will also typically include the candidate's curriculum vitae and may also include a personal statement (which can be useful for better understanding the candidate's interests, mission, and vision) or an educator's portfolio (which can provide a more in-depth understanding of their teaching philosophy and educator experiences). The referee letters, written by nationally and internationally respected peers, are a critical component of the portfolio that will be reviewed by the committee when deciding whether to promote an applicant.

## GENERAL GUIDELINES

The P&T referee has similarities to the peer reviewer. Journal editors look to peer reviewers to offer an outside, but informed, perspective on a submission.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, external referees view the contributions of the candidate from a lens that is different from that of the P&T committee. The referee can both clarify the significance of achievement—as an insider in the community of education scholarship, for example—and add external validity by offering an opinion on how the candidate compares to peers nationally and how this portfolio would be judged at the referee's institution.

Institutions solicit letters from different categories of referees, such as mentors, mentees, collaborators, and external peers or

experts who do not have a close preexisting relationship with the applicant. Objectivity is often important, but the letter writer's subjective experience may have value as well, particularly in letters from mentors or mentees or when illustrating the impact the applicant has had on the specialty or field.

We offer the following general guidelines for writing a letter of recommendation:

- **Adopt the mindset of a neutral, but nurturing referee.**

Letter writers are often selected to write the letter both for their expertise and for their ability to support junior faculty in academic emergency medicine (EM). Committees may not recognize the value that the candidate brings and may not have a strong representation of EM physicians. A letter writer can support the candidate, and academic EM education, by carefully reviewing the applicant's dossier and showing the committee how their contributions meet the institution's standard setting criteria for promotion, through the lens of expertise as an EM clinician and/or scholar. Advancing EM scholars benefits the individual, the department, and the field. However, it is important to be true to one's own meter when commenting on whether the individual would meet criteria for promotion at the letter writer's institution. Therefore, one must balance advocacy with authenticity in order to maintain credibility.

- **Optimize the readability and structure of the letter.**

The letter should be as clear and concise as possible, often consisting of two typed pages. In choosing the format, font, and organization, the letter writer should aim to convey their opinion to the committee as clearly as possible. Consider using boldface type for the applicant's name and your proposed promotion action in the first and final paragraphs. It may also be helpful to summarize each section with a bolded or underlined mini-conclusion (e.g., *Dr. X's [applicant] educational contributions have received national recognition and demonstrate **outstanding** achievement, in comparison to institution Y's [letter writer] promotions and tenure criteria.*) To reduce work and increase standardization, it can be helpful to create a template or outline that includes the content to include in every letter of evaluation. However, it will be important to modify this to align with the specific requirements of a given institution as described further below. A sample P&T letter is included as a supplemental file (Appendix S1).

- **Use equitable, inclusive language.**

Evaluative language in P&T letters should refer to all candidates in a standard format, regardless of gender or race. This should include referring to the candidate with their professional title rather than their first name. Words matter—it may help to have a reference of dimensions of work and specific terminology to acknowledge the candidate's achievements in a way that minimizes implicit bias.<sup>4-6</sup> Avoid terminology that introduces bias (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, ability, age) in the letter.<sup>7-9</sup> Consider applying a screening tool to identify biased language (e.g., using adjectives and descriptors more commonly associated with a given gender), such as a Gender Bias Calculator (<https://slowe.github.io/genderbias/>).

- **Consider all forms of scholarship.**

P&T committees may often favor traditional forms of scholarship and committee work. Consider all types of scholarship (i.e., discovery, teaching, integration, and application) and pay particular attention to highlighting the quality of nonresearch scholarship using established criteria.<sup>10</sup> Emphasize nontraditional contributions and committee work as well as emerging scholarship formats, such as digital scholarship, quality improvement work, and innovations.<sup>11-15</sup> Go beyond bibliometrics to express quality and impact.<sup>16,17</sup>

## STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

An organized approach makes the task of reviewing materials and writing an appropriate evaluation letter manageable and consistent. Our proposed step-by-step guide is shown in [Figure 1](#). The text below highlights important concepts for each of the steps.

### Step 1: Receive and respond to the request

Seeking promotion is a labor-intensive process, and requests for letters are time-sensitive. Upon receipt of a request, the referee should consider their competing projects and deadlines and determine whether they have capacity to accept the request. It is preferable to decline a request that would be difficult to accomplish within the stated time frame rather than writing a superficial letter for such an important career hallmark. Promptly declining a request allows the candidate's department to move on to other available referees. When declining a request, the letter writer may consider providing an explanation (e.g., no time available, conflict of interest) where

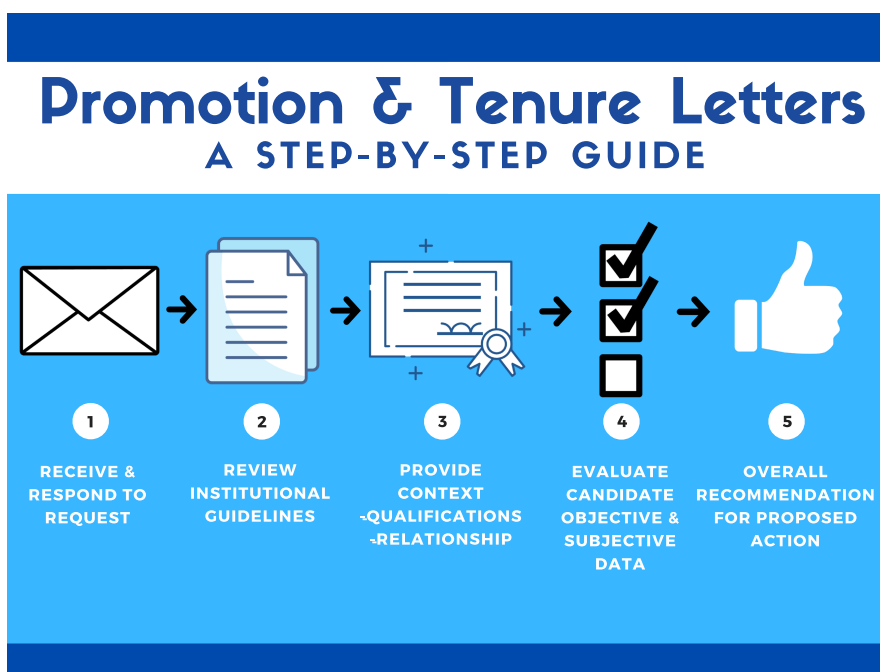
appropriate. It is important to set aside time to review the candidate's materials and write a thoughtful letter which can be completed before the deadline. Most institutions will expect P&T letters to be completed within 1–2 months. Occasionally, departments will require edits or additions to letters to align with the P&T criteria, so submitting early allows a buffer for performing the necessary changes.

It is possible that after agreeing and reviewing the candidate's dossier, the letter writer decides that they cannot provide a strong endorsement and that the letter might be deleterious to the proposed academic action, including cases where the letter writer's promotion criteria are more stringent than that of the candidate's institution. In this case, it would be prudent to have a discussion with the candidate's chair about the appropriate way to proceed. This may spur a discussion at the home institution about whether the candidate should proceed in the current cycle or if different letter writers should be sought.

### Step 2: Review the institutional guidelines

Prior to drafting the letter, it is important to review the application materials in detail, which generally include a letter of invitation from the department that places the request into context and an inventory of documents provided (e.g., curriculum vitae, personal statement, educator's portfolio, sample scholarly articles). In some cases, the department explicitly states what they hope each letter should accomplish (e.g., *Please highlight your work with the candidate in conducting research.*). If no specific guidelines are provided, it is reasonable to assume that a standard, comprehensive review is expected.

Institutional guidelines typically include the details of the academic category and common expectations for the particular rank to



**FIGURE 1** A guide to preparing letters for academic promotion and tenure.

which the candidate is applying. While this paper provides a framework, it is important to tailor the letter to the specific institution, focusing the terminology to match the candidate's institutional P&T guideline verbiage. The candidate should be measured against the specific terms and thresholds for promotion in each category at the proposed rank. Highlighting specific examples that are matched to stated criteria help to focus the P&T committee's analysis, especially since many of the committee members are likely to be outside the candidate's academic focus.

### Step 3: Provide context

The first section should contextualize why the referee was recruited to write this letter and summarize their qualifications. This will typically begin with an introductory sentence stating the intention to provide an analysis of the specific candidate (including their full name and degree(s), possibly in boldface type) and a mention of the proposed rank and series to which the candidate aspires. The remainder of the first paragraph should discuss the letter writer's qualifications, relationship to the candidate, and speculation as to the reason for selection as a referee. A list of the letter writer's specific qualifications and relevant experience (e.g., academic rank, leadership roles, research accomplishments, editorial board positions) should be briefly described (i.e., one to two sentences in length). Alternatively, an accompanying curriculum vitae or referee bio could be attached to the letter. The referee's relationship to the candidate provides context for P&T committee members to apply the letter. Many P&T committees have a balanced need for letters of evaluation (i.e., arm's length) and letters of endorsement (e.g., collaborator, supervisor, or student). This paragraph should also explicitly state any potential conflicts of interest.

### Step 4: Evaluate the candidate using objective and subjective data

The referee should discuss the applicant and situate them within the context of the proposed academic action. This should align with the candidate's institutional P&T guidelines and focus on elements specifically requested of the letter writer in the solicitation request. Each category (e.g., education, research, scholarship, service) should typically have at least one dedicated paragraph. For each category, an analysis of the candidate's accomplishments and how they compare with expectations at this level and among peers in the field should be stated. The focus should be on providing context and clarification, rather than merely duplicating the applicant's curriculum vitae to avoid an overly lengthy letter that may cause the reader to miss key elements. Some strategies to guide this component of the letter include focusing on the most salient achievements, discussing the applicant's reputation (e.g., regional, national, international), and identifying the anticipated trajectory based on current productivity.

Including specific examples to support the evaluative statements helps to situate the candidate for the committee members.<sup>18</sup> This can include comparison with reference standards, such as citations or h-index of peers at a similar academic rank.<sup>19,20</sup>

A knowledgeable referee can provide insight that extends beyond numbers alone by commenting on the relative quality and contextual impact of the contributions. For publications, this may entail reading peer-reviewed publications (or at least a select number of them) and highlighting the overall quality and research impact. Personal observations of clinical performance, research design and leadership, administrative leadership (e.g., supervisory, subordinate, colleague), teaching encounters (e.g., clinical teaching, didactics), nonresearch scholarship, and innovative approaches add a unique dimension to the overall review. When the candidate is known to the referee, they should try to personalize the letter with specific examples (e.g., *Dr. X is excellent with deadlines and is consistently one of the first people to finish their sections on papers*). The referee can interpret narrative comments from learners and summative teaching metrics and highlight the impact of administrative and quality improvements. As the academic world adopts social media and other nontraditional metrics into the discipline, an assessment of the candidate's impact in these areas can provide new perspectives for P&T committees to consider.<sup>11-13</sup>

In some instances, it may be possible that a referee has insufficient experience, information, or contact to comment on a specific domain (e.g., direct observation of clinical performance). If so, the reason for the omission and a suggestion to the P&T committee where they could find similar information should be provided.

### Step 5: Give an overall recommendation for the proposed action

The last paragraph of the letter contains the summary recommendation. Each category can be rated independently, or the referee can compose a summative statement that supports their overall recommendation based on their analysis of the dossier and how the candidate's qualifications match the institution's guidelines for the academic action. It is often helpful to consider how the candidate would fare at the referee's own institution if there were a similar academic track. However, some institutions are moving away from comparing and contrasting across institutions, so it is important to read the instructions regarding how to situate your recommendation carefully.

An overall assessment statement should conclude the letter (possibly using boldface type). One can consider including specific metrics for the summative category, if applicable (e.g., *I have written 12 letters in the past year, for which only two applicants have met the category of outstanding*). Anchors and distributions of evaluations can be provided in an accompanying document, if desired. Alternatively, a prosaic statement can be provided without metrics for the P&T committee to interpret. Finally, a means of contacting the referee

for additional questions or clarifications can be included after the body of the letter.

## ADVANCEMENTS AND CONTROVERSIES

There are several interesting controversies that letter writers may wish to be aware of as they may change the nature of letters requested from various institutions. The following is a list of recent advancements and controversies that have made their way into leading edge P&T processes:

### 1. The Declaration on Research Assessment.

Some institutions are beginning to align with the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) statement. Specifically within the Declaration's fourth clause, institutions are being called upon to: "Be explicit about the criteria used to reach hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions, clearly highlighting, especially for early-stage investigators, that the scientific content of a paper is much more important than publication metrics or the identity of the journal in which it was published."<sup>21</sup> The fifth clause calls for diversification in what types of research outputs are considered valuable and of high impact—specifically calling out software and data sets. The final part of the DORA principles is to encourage institutions and publishers to value open sharing of research. Though the DORA statement stops short of asking institutions to preferentially promote those with a commitment to open access, it hints that perhaps the scientific community may find it useful to align to such principles.

### 2. Equitable acknowledgment of nontraditional and digital scholarship.

A broader discussion of scholarship has begun within our specialty, acknowledging the importance of scholarly resources beyond the traditional peer-reviewed publication (e.g., digital and other social media-based scholarship).<sup>11-13,16,22-24</sup> Moreover, it is important to consider other forms of scholarly contributions as described by Boyer (including his more popular four types of scholarship [i.e., discovery, application, integration, and teaching], but also his later identification of a fifth type of scholarship, engagement, in which community service based on scholarship can impact the public at large).<sup>25,26</sup>

### 3. Mission-based advancement.

At many institutions, mentorship or supervisory activities are less valued than receiving grants and publishing. This is beginning to change, and those who are involved in the "behind-the-scenes" parts of scientific publishing (e.g., mentorship/supervision, journal editors, reviewers) should be considered as individuals worth rewarding and acknowledging via promotion.<sup>27</sup> One can imagine the quantity of peer review, as well as the quality (as evidenced by reviewer awards or editorial board membership) can be valuable in helping to adjudicate the quality of this type of work. Also, new tools are being developed to help some faculty members gain insights into

their performance on mentorship tasks.<sup>28</sup> Such tools will be important to help bolster cases for promotion based on quality of supervision. Additionally, tools such as an educator's portfolio can provide a more expansive understanding of teaching philosophies and both the quantity and the quality of teaching. Other aspects that are key to advancing the specialty should also be considered, such as recognizing quality measures and other operations-based advances. Depending on their specific track (e.g., research, clinician educator, clinical practice), these items may be weighted differently. For example, those who are on a clinical practice track may have greater emphasis placed on quality improvement initiatives and service to the department or institution.

## CONCLUSION

Promotion and tenure letters are a key aspect of the career advancement process, providing the promotion and tenure committee with a more comprehensive picture of the applicant through their collaborators and from external evaluation. This article highlights the general approach to a promotion and tenure letter, provides a step-by-step guide, and discusses current controversies facing this topic. We hope this provides a valuable guide for those who are writing a promotion and tenure letter.

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#### SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of the article at the publisher's website.

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