Health Professions Program

The Dartmouth Composite Letter Process Handbook

Letters of Evaluation are an essential component of your application to a graduate-level, health professional school. Admission committees read letters carefully to learn more about your academic, experiential, and personal qualities. Letters can have a significant impact on your application, so you must understand Dartmouth's Composite Letter of Evaluation Process and think strategically about it.

You are responsible for several parts of this process, including understanding the process; choosing and then communicating with writers; setting deadlines; providing writers with important information, and communicating with HPP. **This handbook is your guide.**

The Health Professions Program (HPP) oversees the composite letter process. We work closely with both applicants and composite writers, coordinate the logistics, and ensure the integrity of your final composite letter. Letters are written on your behalf, so be conscious of the privilege of having people writing to support you in this process. Behave accordingly, with clear communication, gratitude, and respect. Your HPP team is here to assist you at every step of the process.

PLEASE READ THROUGH THIS HANDBOOK, AND KEEP IT ACCESSIBLE, SO YOU ARE PREPARED FOR THE STEPS AHEAD.

Table of Contents

PART ONE: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The Dartmouth Composite Letter of Evaluation

What is the Composite Letter of Evaluation?

The composite letter is a unique, comprehensive letter written by a "composite writer" that provides an in-depth perspective on an applicant's preparedness for medical/dental school. The composite writer integrates their own observations about the applicant with information from the applicant's support letters and other support materials (such as the applicant's autobiographical sketch, resume, and transcript). When completed, the composite will be a holistic summation of your academic, professional, and extracurricular experiences, as well as your personal qualities and character. It is our version of a "committee letter," which you may have learned about on school websites or application services websites.

What is the composite writer's role?

The composite writer is the person you ask to be your head letter writer. They will integrate their evaluation of you with information and quotes from your support letters, as well as information from your autobiographical sketch, resume, and transcript. Additionally, they can provide context if you choose to ask them to share any meaningful information about your personal background or journey that was impactful to your overall trajectory. The composite is a cohesive letter that presents you as a Dartmouth applicant to MD, DO, or dental school.

Your composite writer must be from the Dartmouth community (i.e., Dartmouth College, Geisel, or DHMC). They are often the faculty or staff member who knows you best, and/or with whom you have the strongest connection and/or worked with the most.

What is the role of my support writers?

In addition to your composite writer, **you will choose 3 – 5 support writers to provide letters of recommendation.** Each support writer will contribute their perspective of you and your preparedness for medical or dental school based on their direct experience and

knowledge of you (whether that be through a course, job, internship, athletics, etc.). HPP will provide your support letters to your composite writer to help them write your comprehensive composite letter.

How does the composite letter process work?

While detailing instructions are spelled out further in this handbook, below is a summary of the composite letter process.

You are responsible for understanding the composite letter process. You will choose and ask your support and composite writers, set deadlines with them, and provide them with your support writers with your autobiographical sketch and resume (or transcript if they request it). You will create a PrivateFolio account where your support letters will be uploaded, and where you'll also upload your autobiographical sketch, resume, and transcript. You will stay in communication with your writers, and offer gentle reminders regarding deadlines. When all your support letters and other support materials are uploaded to PrivateFolio, you'll submit a form to let HPP know. This will prompt HPP to send all your support letters and materials to your composite writer.

The composite writer works directly with HPP and does not upload their composite letter to PrivateFolio or have access to it. When the composite writer finishes writing a draft of their composite letter, they will send it to HPP for review. If edits are needed, HPP will work with the composite writer to create a final composite letter draft. Once this is done, HPP will create your Dartmouth Composite Letter of Evaluation Packet and upload it to PrivateFolio. We'll then send you instructions on how to add your packet to your application.

What is included in the Final Composite Letter of Evaluation Packet?

The final Dartmouth Composite Letter of Evaluation Packet is created by HPP staff to ensure confidentiality, integrity, and quality. The final composite letter packet is a single PDF document that includes your composite letter, your support letters, your citation report (if you have one), and a cover letter created by HPP that explains some of the unique aspects of Dartmouth College.

How long does it take HPP to review composite letters?

On average 1 – 4 weeks. The length of time it may take to review a composite letter is influenced by the following: the date it is submitted, the number of other composites on our list to review, the edits needed, how quickly the composite writer can respond to feedback, etc. When determining the order of when to review composites, we consider the date of submission, the date when the student's application was verified, how many other students have a similar timeline, and time restraints on the composite writer's end, etc.

What happens after my final composite letter packet is created?

When the composite letter packet is complete, you will receive a notification from HPP with instructions on how to send your packet from PrivateFolio to AMCAS. Sending your packet from PrivateFolio to AMCAS will be much quicker if you create a letter entry in AMCAS ahead of time. To learn how to create a letter entry in AMCAS for your packet, please see our **Delivery Your Packet Instructions**. These instructions also explain what you need to do to ensure your packet is sent to AACOMAS, AADSAS, or TMDSAS. This step of the process is usually completed during the summer of the year you are applying.

You can submit your primary application without your composite letter packet! It is typical for the composite letter packet to be added later.

Choosing Composite & Support Writers

When choosing your composite and support writers, the best combination will demonstrate different facets of you and your experiences, in and out of the classroom, and provide insight into some of your intellectual, professional, experiential, and personal qualities.

What are the criteria for choosing a composite writer?

You will choose ONE composite writer. Your composite writer must be from the Dartmouth community (i.e., Dartmouth College, Geisel, or DHMC) and are often the person who knows you best, with whom you have the strongest connection and/or worked the most with.

Does my composite writer have to be a Dartmouth faculty member?

While students often select a faculty member to be their composite writer, you can choose someone from outside the classroom, such as a coach, research or job supervisor, extracurricular or academic advisor, etc.

What if the person I want to ask to be my composite writer no longer works at Dartmouth?

Consult with HPP before you ask. There have been cases where composite writers have written for students despite no longer working at Dartmouth, but it depends on how recently they left Dartmouth and the context in which they met and interacted with the student.

I'm struggling to find a composite writer. What can I do?

This situation most often happens for older alumni, who no longer have as strong connections at Dartmouth. If you find yourself in this situation, do NOT worry! **Consult with HPP first.** Often students have more options for a composite writer than they think.

If you are absolutely unable to find a composite writer, instead of submitting a composite letter, you can submit a Letter Packet which is comprised of 3 – 5 support letters. A letter

packet is a valid alternative to the composite letter packet and will be accepted by medical, dental, etc. schools.

What are the criteria for choosing my support writers?

In addition to your composite writer, **you will also choose 3 – 5 support writers.** We highly recommend your entire writer group (composite + support writers) include:

- Two faculty who have taught you in a science class (one can be neuro or engineering, if science-focused).
- At least one faculty from your major (if you're not a science major) or another type of class that was meaningful for you.
- Writers from outside the classroom, such as a research supervisor (PI), coach, internship supervisor, job supervisor, FSP faculty, extracurricular activity, etc. They can be individuals outside of Dartmouth as well.

Miscellaneous Questions about Choosing Writers

I'm nervous about bothering the people I want to be my writers. Is it really okay to ask them?

YES! Part of working in an educational environment is the value system of supporting student's growth. Writing letters is part of faculty and staff members' roles. You want to ask people who have seen you in action in some way.

Should I ask in person or over email?

If you see them regularly, feel free to ask in person. However, it is perfectly okay to start the conversation through email. Some ideas for how to proceed:

- If they don't already know, inform them of your goal and plan to apply to med/vet/dental school.
- Ask if they would consider writing you a composite/support letter.
- Inform them of the specific reasons why you are asking them to write for you (ex. you appreciate the class you took with them or the conversations you had with them, or working with them in class, lab or research, or job/internships allowed you to experience growth in a particular way, etc.)
- Invite them to meet at their convenience in person or through Zoom to further discuss if this is something they are willing to do.

What if I am not "friends" with any of my writers like I was in high school?

There are a range of ways someone can "know" you. The best choices for writers are those who have had the chance to observe relevant qualities and characteristics—even if you weren't at the level of being "buddies." Were you an active participant in class who

demonstrated an interest in learning? Did you speak to a professor before/after class or during their office hours? Did you engage during collaborative learning/flipped classroom spaces? Were you inclusive? Collaborative? In smaller classes did you lend something to discussions; engage with the material, etc.?

How do I get a letter from my lab because I mostly work with a grad student, not my PI?

Because this is super common, PIs and grad students are usually very willing to combine their efforts. Grad students often draft a letter or summarize information that the PI will formalize into a final letter. It's okay to directly ask them about this.

My internship supervisor was worried that they don't have a formal writing background, can they still write?

Most certainly! Medical schools want to learn about their applicants and appreciate that writers from any background can write sincere, thoughtful letters.

Are there resources to help my writers with the writing process?

Yes! We have resources for both composite and support writers. If your writer would like to receive those resources, please let them know to reach out to us at Health.Professions.Program@dartmouth.edu.

What should I do after I've confirmed ALL my writers?

1. **You should set letter submission deadlines with both your composite and support writers.** See section "Setting Deadline for Writers" for more information.
2. **Open your Privatefolio account using Dartmouth-specific instructions.** See the question "How do I create a PrivateFolio account?" for more information.
   - Send each of your SUPPORT WRITERS (not your composite writer) a Letter of Recommendation Request – this will prompt PrivateFolio to send an upload link that will allow your writers to submit their letters directly to your account. See the question "How do my support writers upload their letters to PrivateFolio?" for more information.
3. **Send each of your support writers a thank you note.** Be sure to remind them of the deadlines you agreed on, a notice that they will receive a PrivateFolio upload link, and when they should expect your resume and autobiographical sketch.
4. **You should also emphasize the following format requirements for letters**.
   - **Letters MUST INCLUDE LETTERHEAD AND SIGNATURE!** Any letters without letterhead and/or signature can potentially slow down the creation of your composite letter packet.
   - If your writer doesn't have a letterhead, they can enter at the top of their letter their name, contact information, title/position, and name of their employer.

- All letters must also be dated.
5. **Communicate with your composite writer** and send them a reminder of the agreed-upon deadline.

Setting Deadlines for Writers

What should I consider when setting deadlines for my writers?

- We recommend considering the following logistical timeframes.
- Give your composite writer **4 – 6 weeks** to write AT LEAST.
- Once you submit your Release to Composite Writer form to HPP, it can take **1 – 3 business days** to process.
- Once your composite writer submits their composite letter to HPP, it can take **1 – 4 weeks** to review it.
- Once your composite letter is finalized, it can take **1 – 3 business days** for HPP to create your completed Composite Letter of Evaluation Packet.
- Overall, the entire process can take **8 – 13 weeks**.

Who should I set deadlines with first? My composite writer or support writers?

You should set deadlines with your composite writer FIRST! Once you have agreed on a CLEAR deadline with your composite writer, you should work backward to set deadlines with your support writers. For instance, if your composite writer needs to complete their composite letter at an earlier time due to other commitments, then adjust your support writers' deadlines accordingly – with their agreement. Make sure to also adjust completing your autobiographical sketch and resume accordingly. If unexpected timing concerns occur, consult with HPP.

The Autobiographical Sketch

What is the Autobiographical Sketch?

The autobiographical sketch is a useful way to help aid your letter writers with the writing process by providing them with relevant information about your background, motivations, abilities, experiences, etc. In addition to the auto sketch, you may find it useful – if your writers are willing – to meet to discuss your application.

The self-reflection involved in this project is also a great way to begin the reflection that is essential for the application itself. The format is flexible. Write your sketch as an essay or in sections or even bullet points. You can choose/create your own relevant sections (ex. family

influences, growing up, before college, academics). Make sure to highlight experiences that were especially meaningful or relevant to your journey and you personally. Address this essential question, "Why medicine?".

The autobiographical sketch is also a place to share any unique challenges you may have experienced, but you don't have to share this with your writers if you don't want to. Feel free to discuss this with an advisor. Questions to consider for your autobiographical sketch (and ultimately for your application), are below.

What are the questions I should consider when writing my auto sketch?

Self-reflection is vital for the auto sketch and for excellent application writing. Consider the following questions:

- What were your formative experiences with your family, education, or community before college?
- What experiences have you had over the years that have been meaningful to you?
- How have you grown academically and personally? Do you have any academic challenges to discuss?
- What classes have meant the most to you?
- Have you conducted research? How has it been meaningful to you?
- What extracurriculars or passions (music, athletics, etc.) are you involved in? How have they inspired or surprised you? What do you find meaningful about them?
- Have you engaged in certain themes in your studies or experiences (ex. working with children, elderly, disadvantaged communities, etc., or researching autism, dementia, oncology, etc.)?
- Why do you want to study medicine/dentistry? What has influenced and affirmed this choice? Who has influenced or inspired you?

PrivateFolio

What is PrivateFolio?

PrivateFolio is where your support letter writers (not your composite writer!) will upload their letters. It is also where you will upload your autobiographical sketch, resume, and transcript. **Be sure to waive your confidentiality (this is VERY important to medical schools).**

Additionally, when your Dartmouth Composite Letter of Evaluation Packet is finalized, HPP will upload it to PrivateFolio for you to send to AMCAS.

How do I create a PrivateFolio account?

1. **Use the Dartmouth-specific sign-up page.** You must use this sign-up page in order to receive the Dartmouth account discounts and to be properly affiliated with the Dartmouth Health Professions Program, as well as allow HPP to access your account.
2. Enter your information, choose a password, and press SUBMIT to create your account.
3. You will receive a confirmation email. Click on the confirmation link in the email, and then log into your account using your email address and password.
4. You will be asked to choose an account term. With your discount, you can select a one-year account for FREE. However, if you would like to have access to your letters for future use, you should choose and pay for a 3-year account (discounted to $14.99) or a 5-year account (discounted to $27.99). You can always renew or extend your account term in the future.

How do my support writers upload their letters to PrivateFolio?

In PrivateFolio, you'll send each of your support writers a Letter of Recommendation Request. This will prompt PrivateFolio to send an upload link to your writer. Follow the instructions below on how to submit a Letter of Recommendation Request.

1. Log into your PrivateFolio account.
2. Under **RECOMMENDATION LETTERS**, click on **REQUEST A LETTER**.
3. Fill in your letter writer's name and contact information, as well as a title for the document (ex. Professor FIRST NAME, LAST NAME - Letter of Recommendation). This title will be visible to the writer and any institution you send deliveries to.
4. You have the option of modifying the text of the request that will be sent to your letter writer. **You can also specify a due date for the letter and whether it should be signed. We HIGHLY RECOMMEND that you do BOTH!**
5. Check the box indicating that you waive rights of access (this is required to ensure the confidentiality of letters).
6. Click on **SUBMIT.**
7. Your letter writer will receive an email with the details of your request and a link through which they can upload the letter.
8. You will receive a confirmation email once the letter writer has submitted their letter to PrivateFolio and is available.

PLEASE NOTE: As you're making your letter of recommendation requests, make sure that your writers understand that **BOTH LETTERHEAD AND SIGNATURE ARE REQUIRED!**

I submitted the PrivateFolio letter request, but my writer didn't receive an upload link. What do I do?

It's not unusual for the upload link to end up in writers' spam or junk folders. Have your writer check there first. If they are still unable to the upload link, have them reach out directly to PrivateFolio for assistance. Oftentimes, PrivateFolio is able to upload the letter on the writer's behalf. PrivateFolio can be reached at (855) 976-1245 or help@privatefolio.com.

Summary of Task to a Completed Composite Letter

YOUR STEPS

1. **Choose 1 Composite Writer:** Must be from the Dartmouth Community (i.e., Dartmouth, Geisel, or DHMC). See choosing Composite & Support Writers section below for more information.
2. **Choose 3 – 5 Support Writers:** These can include both Dartmouth Community and elsewhere. See choosing Composite & Support Writers section below for more information.
3. **Agree on Deadlines:** Discuss/agree on letter deadlines with all your writers.
4. **Write an Autobiographical Sketch & Update Your Resume:** Then send these documents directly to your support writers (not your composite writer) to assist them in their writing. Provide a transcript if they ask.
5. **Create a PrivateFolio Account:** Make sure to use the **Dartmouth-specific instructions** on how to create an account to receive Dartmouth discounted rates. See the question "How do I create a PrivateFolio account?" for more information.
6. **Send Each of Your SUPPORT WRITERS a Letter of Recommendation Request:** This will prompt PrivateFolio to send an upload link that will allow your support writers to submit their letters directly to your account. **DO NOT send your composite writer a request.** See the question "How do my support writers upload their letters to PrivateFolio?" for more information.
7. **Communicate with Your Writers:** Be sure to regularly communicate with your writers. Confirm deadlines after they agree to write, let them know to expect your autobiographical sketch and resume, let them know to expect the PrivateFolio upload link, and send polite reminders as you get closer to your agreed-upon deadlines.
8. **Upload your Documents to PrivateFolio:** Be sure to upload your autobiographical sketch, resume, and transcript (and citation report if you have one) to PrivateFolio: These documents will be sent by HPP to your composite writer along with your support letters and instructions.
9. **Monitor Your PrivateFolio Account:** Keep track of your support letters as they are submitted.

10. **Submit the [Release to Composite Writer Form](): When ALL** your support letters are uploaded to PrivateFolio **AND** you have uploaded your autobiographical sketch, resume, and transcript, submit the Release to Composite Writer Form. This will prompt HPP to send your materials to your composite writer.
11. **Submit the [Verification Notification Form to HPP](): Do this once your primary application has been verified by AMCAS, AACOMAS, TMDSAS, or AADSAS to let us know. Please note that while we'll take this information into account to help determine the order we review composite letters, it is NOT our only criteria. Other criteria we consider are the date composites are submitted, any time restraints composite writers might have, and the number of other applicants who have submitted the verification form with a similar timeline.

HPP's STEPS

1. **Release Materials to Composite Writer:** After HPP receives your Release to Composite Writer Form, we will compile your materials (support letters, autobiographical sketch, resume, and transcript) into a single PDF document that we will send to your composite writer, along with instructions and resources to help them with the writing process. **This step generally takes HPP 1 – 3 business days to complete.**

THE COMPOSITE WRITER'S STEPS

1. **Write the Composite Letter and Submit Draft to HPP:** The composite writer will review your materials and integrate information and quotes from your materials with their own perspective to create a holistic evaluation. When they are finished writing, they'll submit their composite draft to HPP for review. **You should give your composite writer 4 – 6 weeks to write AT LEAST when agreeing on deadlines with your composite writer and support writers.**

HPP'S FINAL STEPS

1. **Review the Composite Letter:** After HPP receives the composite draft from your composite writer, it will go through our review process to ensure quality. If any edits are needed, we will work with your composite writer to create a final composite draft. **This process can take 1 – 4 weeks depending on a variety of factors,** see question "How long does it take HPP to review composite letters?" for more information.
2. **Create the Final Composite Letter of Evaluation Packet:** Once HPP and your composite writer have agreed on a final composite draft, HPP will create your Dartmouth Composite Letter of Evaluation Packet. This will include your composite letter, support letters, citation report (if you have one), and an HPP cover letter that explains the unique aspects of Dartmouth College. **In general, this step can take 1 – 3 business days.**

3. **Upload Your Composite Letter of Evaluation Packet to PrivateFolio:** After HPP has created your packet, we will upload it to your PrivateFolio account and send you instructions on how to add it to AMCAS. Note that the process to add your application to AACOMAS, AADSAS, and TMDSAS is different. See **Delivering Your Packet Instructions** for more information.

YOUR FINAL STEPS

1. **Add Your Composite Letter of Evaluation Packet:** Using the instructions HPP sends you, you will add your packet to AMCAS. Note that the process to add your application to AACOMAS, AADSAS, and TMDSAS is different. See **Delivering Your Packet Instructions** for more information.

PART TWO: THE COMPOSITE LETTER TIMELINE

These target deadlines are in place to benefit you, and we highly encourage you to follow this timeline as closely as possible. However, we will still work with you to have your composite letter packet completed even if your letter writers have a later timeline.

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE?	DESCRIPTION OF TASK	TARGET DEADLINE	RECOMMENDED FINAL DEADLINE
YOU	Begin reaching out to and confirming your composite/support letter writers. Once you confirm your writers, confirm deadlines.	Jan 15	April 1
YOU	Provide your SUPPORT WRITERS with your resume and autobiographical sketch (and transcript if requested).	Jan 15	April 1
YOU	Open a **PrivateFolio** account and submit a "Request a Letter of Recommendation Form" to each of your supporting letter writers. **Do NOT submit one to your composite writer.**	Jan 15	April 1
YOU	Upload documents to PrivateFolio: • Resume • Autobiographical Sketch • Dartmouth transcript/citation report. • Additional transcripts – other transcripts where you took	March 25	May 30

	any college or graduate-level coursework.		
YOU AND YOUR SUPPORT WRITERS	• Letter writers upload letters to PrivateFolio. • You are responsible for monitoring your PrivateFolio account. • HPP does not monitor incoming letters. **Do not send support letters to AMCAS.** They will be included in your completed composite letter packet.	March 25	May 30
YOU	Submit the **Release to Composite Writer Form** online when all your supporting letters and documents are uploaded to PrivateFolio.	March 25	May 30
HPP	HPP will send your materials to your composite writer. Please allow at least 4 – 6 weeks for your writer to complete the composite letter.	March 25	May 30
COMPOSITE WRITER	Your composite writer submits their composite letter to HPP for review. You cannot access or read the letter—it is kept confidential. **BE SURE TO SET A CLEAR DEADLINE WITH YOUR COMPOSITE WRITER.**	Mid-May - June 25	July 31
HPP	HPP reviews and finalizes your composite letter, creates your packet, and uploads it to PrivateFolio. HPP emails you once the process is complete and will provide you with instructions on how to transmit letters into the application systems. **Please note this entire process can take 1-4 weeks.**	Mid-May - August	September
YOU	You will transmit the packet from your PrivateFolio account to the application system by following the instructions provided to you by HPP.	As soon as you receive HPP instructions	-

| YOU | After your primary application has been verified, make sure to fill out the **Verification Notification Form**. Please note that while we'll use this information to help determine the order we review composite letters, it is NOT our only criteria. Other criteria we consider are the date composites are submitted, and any time restraints composite writers might have. | As soon as your app is verified | - |

PART THREE: THE APPLICATION TIMELINE

These deadlines are in place to benefit you, and we highly encourage you to follow this timeline as closely as possible. However, we will still work with you to have your application completed even if you have a later timeline.

Late Fall 2024 – Early Winter 2025	Assess the strength of your application with a Pre-Health Assistant Dean.
	Understand the application/composite process and timeline.
	Choose composite writer + 3-5 support letters & make your requests to them.
	Set letter deadlines with your writers.
	Open a **PrivateFolio** account.
Winter – Early Spring 2025	Complete writer choices and requests.
	Write autobiographical sketch and resume and send to your support writers.
	Request official transcripts and upload it and resume/autobiographical sketch to PrivateFolio.
	Send Letters of Recommendation requests from PrivateFolio to your support writers.
	Monitor PrivateFolio and send gentle reminders to support writers.
	Attend HPP's Writing for the Application Workshops.
	Start reflecting/brainstorming your essays and activities writing for your application.
	Start creating your school list.
Spring 2025	Monitor PrivateFolio. Submit **Release to Composite Writer form** to HPP when all support letters + your official transcript, autobiographical sketch, and resume are uploaded.

	Start drafting your personal statement and activities/experiences.	
	Seek writing feedback from Pre-Health Assistant Deans	
	Attend HPP's AMCAS Application Workshop.	
	Request official transcript from the registrar (of any institution you took college courses from) and have them sent it directly to your application.	
Late Spring – Early Summer 2025	Complete your school list.	
	Complete writing for your primary application (Pre-Health Assistant Deans can provide feedback).	
	Submit primary application (TMDSAS opens earlier than other applications).	
	Prepare for Situations Judgement Tests (SJT), i.e., CASPer and PREview.	
Mid-Summer 2025	After you receive confirmation that your primary application has been verified, make sure to fill out the **Verification Notification Form**. HPP will use this information to help determine the order composites are reviewed once they are submitted.	
	Write and complete secondary application essays. Pre-Health Assistant Deans can provide feedback.	
	Composite writers submit composite letter drafts. HPP works with writers to create final drafts.	
	HPP creates composite packet, uploads it to PrivateFolio, and provides instructions to send it to your application.	