Narrative Assessment in Clinical Settings:
What Should I Write on Medical Student Evaluation Forms?

Basic Principles:

The goal of clinical evaluators is to give students actionable feedback that they can use to become better physicians, whether it's through competency ratings or narrative comments, whether it's during formative or summative touch points. All narrative comments should be:

- Based on multiple, directly observed behaviors (with specific examples cited)
- Objective, non-judgmental, and respectful
- Valuable/Actionable/Constructive (i.e., something the learner can work on)
- Behaviorally anchored (ideally using evaluation form anchors)
- Completed at the end of the rotation (don't wait)
- Discussed directly with students at some point (no surprises!)

To do this, evaluators need to discuss expectations early, keep careful notes over time, and know the school/rotation's objectives/assessment system. Ideally, final narrative should build on what was reviewed with the learner at their midpoint feedback.

> **Be more of a guide,
> less of a judge**

Best Practices:

Your narrative comments don't need to be extensive but do need to highlight strengths AND areas for development. One way to think about it is "glow and grow":

Glow	Grow
Strengths	Areas for Development
Reinforce what they're doing well	Assist them in improving competencies (and justify ratings)
"Amazing teamwork—really worked effectively with non-physician professionals."	"Work to better identify and describe subtle physical exam findings like heart murmurs."
"Did great looking up key issues in the scientific literature and sharing with team."	"Tighten oral presentations, particularly to better align for setting and team needs."
"Very conscientious and hard-working, staying late regularly, eager to take on more responsibilities."	"It was difficult for the team to function effectively when the learner arrived late to rounds four times during the month."

Is it OK to cite growth and learning? Absolutely—growth mindset is a strength. However, we recommend NOT to include specific information about a student's future career path or any references to grading or test scores.   And try to make it grammatically correct, integrated, and readable.

Please make narrative comments about every competency in which the learner achieved a less than perfect score, in part to justify the rating, but mainly to give the student actionable feedback on what they can do to improve on future rotations. Preceptors who fail to do this are more likely to be involved in grade appeals and will have less-than-satisfied learners.

Here's an example of a good narrative evaluation:

> Student brought a very good fund of knowledge and especially strong common sense and clinical-reasoning skills to her evaluations. She knew our patients very well and was fluent with the most important information. She was especially helpful to the team, with a keen perception of procedural skill that allowed her to participate in operating room procedures far above the usual skill level expected of a student. She brought uncommon maturity and situational awareness and these allowed her to function with an uncommon level of independence in the daily management of our patients. Although the statement is frequently overused, student did actually function in all respects at the level of a good intern. She was very efficient. Her H&Ps were remarkably thoughtful and captured even the complex nuances of lengthy discussions with our patients.

Bias Mitigation:

Narrative language should be…

- Reflective of competencies, not traits ("conscientious" better than "lovely" or "nice")
- Full of agentic language, not communal ("hard-working" better than "helpful")

Unfortunately, trait-based and communal language is considered less important to residencies and yet more often applied to URiM/female students. We want to help everyone put their best foot forward. It is ok to highlight team based or communication-based skills, just remember to focus on the skill, not the way the student made you feel or traits that you think they possess.

After writing some comments, ask yourself, "would I feel the same about it if the learner were of a different demographic?"

Other Resources:

Gender Bias Calculator *https://www.tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/*
OMED Faculty Development Page: https://www.omed.pitt.edu/giving-feedback
UCSF Guidelines on Narrative Evaluation:
https://meded.ucsf.edu/sites/meded.ucsf.edu/files/inline-files/Good%20assessment%20practice%20-%20evalution%20examples.pdf