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Study Strategy

It is very important to learn the common patterns for referral letters. However, you must always be ready to react to the task given on exam day. Take the time to learn and understand the basic grammar rules and always remember to include the chief complaint, purpose of writing or your main concern. Practice writing introductions using the sample case notes provided in your course. Your goal should be to write error free introductions as this will get your writing off to a positive start and increase the chances of achieving your target score.

BODY PARAGRAPHS

Most referral letters will contain 2 or 3 body paragraphs located between the introduction and the conclusion. The paragraphs should focus on a specific aspect of the patient's history. You will need to paraphrase and expand on the case notes and follow the standard conventions associated with medical referral letters. The length of the paragraphs will vary, but an approximate guideline to meet the required word length of 180~200 words is as follows:

Introduction: 25 words

Body paragraph 1: 70 words

Body paragraph 2: 40 words

Body paragraph 3: 40 words

Conclusion: 25 words

Paragraph Structure

A good paragraph will contain 3 main elements:

1. A topic sentence which introduces the reader to the main idea of the

paragraph. In many cases it will identify and/or summarise an area of concern regarding the patient. Quite often it is written in original words rather than from words in the case notes.

2. Supporting sentences which may contain the detail regarding patient history, descriptions of symptoms, significant aspects from the treatment record, causes and effects, trends and so on. Quite often this information can be taken directly from the case notes, and written as full sentences. However, you will need to paraphrase the information into your own words. This includes:
 - Changing verbs to nouns: complain=complaint
 - Changing adjectives to nouns: lethargic=lethargy
 - Using synonyms where appropriate
3. Signal words link sentences together so that the information flows smoothly and is easy to read.

Common signal words which can help you present information clearly and logically include:

Time:

Initially, At that time, On review today, On consultation today, Recently, Currently, Over the past 3 weeks..., Two weeks later, On her next visit, 3 months ago, Since that time, Initial examination..., On 19/08/21...

More information:

In addition, Apart from this,
also (use within a sentence, not to start a sentence)

Location:

During hospitalisation, Initial examination at my clinic revealed..., On examination....

Contrast:

However, Despite, Although

Result:

Therefore, Consequently, As a result, For this reason...

Emphasis:

Please note, My main concern is..., What concerns me most is....

Empathy:

Unfortunately, Regrettably, (Note, do not overuse these words. Save them for situations where there is a negative prognosis or significant deterioration the patient's condition)

Subject:

In terms of her social history..., With regard to her medication...,Based on the blood test results. ,

Regarding her medical history....., Her dental history shows..., The risk factors include. , Treatment to date includes...

Advice: (to a patient)

It is important to..., I recommend...ing....., Please ensure that....

Sample Paragraphs: (Medicine example). For other professions, refer to your profession specific course page

Body Paragraph 1**Case Notes****Patient:**

Ms Sandra Marcus

05/01/21

Subjective

Noticed neck swelling 2 months ago, not painful, olive size

Objective

Generally healthy look, BMI 23, pulse 80/min, BP 120/80, temperature 37

Neck examination: anterior neck swelling 2x2 cm non-tender and moves with deglutition, no palpable lymph nodes CVS,RS, ABD. Examinations are normal

Assessment

Thyroid nodule

Management

Order TFTs

U/S neck

Review 2 wks

Paragraph

Ms Marcus presented on 05/01/21 complaining of a painless neck swelling, which she had noticed two months previously. On examination, I observed a non-tender, anterior neck swelling, 2x2 cm in size, which moved with deglutition.

There were no palpable lymph nodes, and CVS, RS and ABD examinations were normal. Thyroid function tests (TFTs) and an ultrasound of her neck were ordered.

Analysis

- State subjective history first
 - Past perfect to describe symptoms leading up to an earlier consultation
 - When presenting objective history, you can use active tense as well to state your findings
 - Medical acronyms can be used when writing to another health professional who would understand
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Body Paragraph 2

Case Notes

21/01/21

Subjective:

Sandra worried about results. No new complaints

Objective:

Normal vital signs, no change in thyroid exam. TFTs normal
US exam → multiple nodules, calcification both lobes of thyroid

Assessment & management:

Diagnosis:

multi-nodular goiter. Advised surgical review to rule out malignancy.

Sandra reluctant to undergo surgical intervention. Asked for one week to think it over

Defaulted her appointment

Paragraph

On review two weeks later, Ms Marcus reported no change. The TFT results were normal, but the ultrasound showed multiple nodules with bilateral calcifications. I informed Ms Marcus of my provisional diagnosis, multi-nodular goitre, and a surgical review was advised to rule out the possibility of malignancy. However, she was reluctant and defaulted her next appointment.

Analysis

- Use active or passive for examination results.
 - Uses mainly past tense
 - Link consultations with appropriate time references rather than dates
 - Borrow or paraphrase with professional vocabulary where appropriate
 - Don't forget articles for countable nouns
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Body Paragraph 3

Case Notes

Defaulted her appointment and presented today 06/04/21

Subjective: Complained swelling ↑ in size (1 month) Noticed diff. swallowing (3 weeks) hoarse voice (1 week) Patient accepting surgical intervention

Objective: Thyroid ↑ size, firm, limited mobility, enlarged lymph nodes R) side

Plan: Refer pt. to endocrine surgeon for examination of possible malignancy

Relevant History:

Single woman with one child aged 7 years. Works as a librarian.

Known asthmatic. Uses Ventolin reliever inhaler

Allergies: Nil

Paragraph

Today, she presented with increased swelling, hoarseness of voice and difficulty in swallowing. The thyroid is firm with limited mobility, and there are some enlarged lymph nodes on the right side.

Please note, Ms Marcus has a history of asthma, for which she uses a Ventolin inhaler. She has no known allergies and is a single mother of a 7-year-old child.

Analysis

- Uses signal words appropriately
 - Uses present tense to describe current findings that are unlikely to change
 - Uses a variety of sentences including simple, compound and complex.
 - Adds additional useful information before the conclusion.
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