

## **Guidelines for Creating PDF's for VirtualEvals**

When we developed **VirtualEvals**, we wanted a system that would allow advisors (senders) to continue to provide letters of evaluation to health professions schools in whatever format they wanted to use, e.g., a committee letter with or without copies of other letters. And we wanted to make it easy for the receiving schools to access whatever documents you provided for your applicants. Incorporating the letter or letters into a single PDF (portable document format) for each applicant was the logical way to accomplish that goal.

For 2009 we will allow you to post an “additional letter” later in the application cycle (more details can be found in the “Instructions for Sending Schools” when they are posted). But remember, it is in the best interest of your applicants to have the initial PDF you post be as complete as possible. Just like they did in the days of hard copy letters, schools may begin their evaluation process when they receive the initial packet of letters from you. If it is incomplete, your applicant may not receive a positive evaluation.

### **There are basically two ways to produce PDF's.**

- Starting with a hard copy of a document, you can scan the document and save the scanned version as a PDF.
- Starting with an electronic version of a document, e.g., a letter or form in Microsoft Word, you can convert that document into a PDF by methods such as printing to a PDF, or converting to a PDF using conversion software. (see bottom of this page for further details)

### **Likewise there are at least two approaches to gathering multiple letters into a single PDF.**

- If you are scanning, you can physically put together all the pages you want to include and scan them at the same time, using settings on your scanner that will create a multi-page PDF.
- You can scan pages individually, and/or convert documents to PDF's individually and then combine/merge them to make a single PDF.

Since there are so many ways to approach creating PDF's, most of which rely on whatever hardware and software is available to you at your institution, we cannot offer individualized technical support for generating PDF's to each sending school. What we can do is post some guidelines and include some comments from other senders (see below). But, if necessary, we urge you to consult with people at your own institution who are knowledgeable about creating PDF's.

### **When generating PDF's there are two factors to consider and they can be related.**

- You want to create a high quality PDF that is easily readable on screen or in a printed version.

- You do not want the PDF to be a large file. Large PDF's take more time to open and to print. And in the case of receiving schools that save the PDF's to their own electronic system, large PDF's require more storage space on their servers.

**Please follow these guidelines when creating PDF's for posting to VirtualEvals. Many of the suggestions are based on surveys we conduct from time to time of receiving schools.**

- In most cases, a PDF should not exceed 1MB (1000 KB) and should not be more than 10-12 printed pages. If you are uploading a PDF that is >1MB you will be alerted, but the PDF will be successfully uploaded to VirtualEvals. If you are attempting to upload a PDF that is >2 MB, you will receive an alert that the PDF is too big and the PDF will not be uploaded. Please check to see if your scanner settings were correct and rescan the letters into a smaller PDF before attempting to upload it.
- Scanned PDF's should be black and white, not color or greyscale. Scanning in color or greyscale results in file sizes that are quite large. Also color is not necessary. The receiving schools that print do so in black and white and those that read the letter on a computer don't care if it is in color.
- In general scanning in black and white at 200-300 dpi should be fine. But check the file size. If you don't know how to do this, please ask someone in your office.
- If you want to test the quality of your scanned or converted PDF, view it yourself and print it from your own computer.
- Do not include photos.
- If possible, avoid the use of "bulky" letterhead, i.e., letterhead with extensive logos, and pages with a lot of dense lettering. Receiving schools realize that you generally cannot control what is sent to you from other evaluators. However, in your own letterhead, please avoid bulky letterhead and extensive logos.
- Include an ID number on the first page of the PDF. For MD and DO applicants, this will be the AAMC number and/or AACOMAS number. In the case of applicants to TMDSAS, it will be the TMDSAS ID. If an applicant is applying to both TMDSAS and AMCAS, you can include both numbers on the front page. Optometry schools do not assign a specific number to their applicants. If any school asks for a Social Security Number, use only the last four digits (see next bullet).
- **Do not include a US social security number (SSN) or Canadian SSI on anything** posted to VirtualEvals (letters or the applicant record). Most institutions have banned the use of SSN/SSI because of identity theft. In 2006, a receiving school found it necessary to print out letters with SSN, mask the SSN and then re-

scan the letters. What a waste of time and effort!

- A number of receiving schools have suggested that we limit the number of letters included to 6 or less. We do not feel VirtualEvals should establish a limit, but we wanted to pass this along to you to take into account. Most receiving schools have told us that beyond 4-6 letters, more letters rarely, if ever, help an applicant.
- Many receiving schools wanted us to limit PDF's posted to VirtualEvals to 10 pages. We do not plan to limit the number of pages; however, we recommend that you consider their request and why they made it. It is their opinion that every applicant can be sufficiently presented in 10 pages or less. Please keep in mind that many of the schools receive 7,000+ applicants. They want to give every applicant a full and fair review and so they want to read all the letters. But, what they have told us is that often the letters that are included are simply not helpful or are superfluous.
- Do not include a list of those whose letters are included in the PDF; the receivers don't find it helpful.
- Do not include a description of your school, your grading system, or application and acceptance statistics in each PDF you post to VirtualEvals. We have introduced an Institutional Profile as part of VirtualEvals to allow you to share this information in a more efficient manner.
- Do not send FERPA waiver forms for each letter or an overall FERPA waiver form. The receiving schools request that you keep those forms on file and simply let them know if a letter is non-confidential (i.e., a form is not on file). You can state in your Institutional Profile that all letters are confidential unless they are stamped "non-confidential." Then buy a "non-confidential" stamp and use it to call attention to those for which you don't have a form on file (or the student delivered the letter to you in an open envelope).

Again, please note that due to the fact that there are many types of scanners and many different set-ups, we can not advise you on how to scan documents beyond what is in these guidelines. We recommend that you solicit advice from any technical support you have at your institution or others in your department who have experience creating PDF's. We personally have had a great experience using the HP Scanjet 7650 set on black and white at 200 dpi.

### **Advice on using conversion programs**

More and more advisors are using conversion programs to convert MS Word docs to PDF. If you have Adobe Acrobat Standard or Professional (the writer not the free reader program), you can do that easily. Or if you have MS Word 2007 there is a PDF conversion built into that program. For those that prefer more a more affordable

approach, several advisors suggest Foxit (see <http://www.foxitsoftware.com/>) or PDF Creator.

Here are some comments from advisors:

- I use Adobe Acrobat 8 Professional. I'm not sure how expensive it is, but it works great, especially with combining letters into one document.
- I converted Word docs to PDFs last year quite easily. All my committee letters are electronic so I don't have to scan at all. I thought the conversion worked really well. And as you know I am technologically challenged so anything I can do should be really easy for someone else.
- I use Adobe Acrobat 7.0 Professional (MAC version). What I post to VE is a pdf file that has been converted from a Word doc file (the doc file often includes scanned images of evaluation letters submitted on letterhead hard copy). When purchased in May 2005 it cost \$159. I have never had a problem and it is slick as a whistle to use = "one button" conversion.
- Here in our office we've been using the scan and convert method from hard copies. (Even if we receive a letter via email, we always print a hard copy to keep in the student's file.) We are able to scan directly from our self-feeding copy machine, which makes things very fast and easy. We then use the Adobe pdf creator via the print function. I haven't used other convertors before, but all I know is that this one is SO EASY! Our department provides it on our computers for us. I highly recommend it.
- With Microsoft Office 2007 you can save a Word file as a pdf file right in Word 2007 with the "save as" button.
- Most of the outside letters come to me in hard copy. We have a wonderful copy machine with a scanner function that scans documents, converts them to PDF, and then emails them to me. I then use Adobe Acrobat Professional to consolidate the letters and arrange them in the order that I want. I like the Adobe software because it allows you to do more than the conversion programs. It is not free, but we have a pricing agreement with Adobe that made it affordable.
- We use foxit to merge and create pdf files. This is a much better program because it takes less time to open and is easier to use.

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