

Avoiding gender bias in reference writing

Got a great student? Planning to write a super letter of reference?
Don't fall into these common traps based on unconscious gender bias.

Mention research & publications

Letters of reference for men are 4x more likely to mention publications and twice as likely to have multiple references to research. Make sure you put these critical accomplishments in every letter!

Don't stop now!

On average, letters for men are 16% longer than letters for women and letters for women are 2.5x as likely to make a minimal assurance ('she can do the job') rather than a ringing endorsement ('she is the best for the job').

Emphasize accomplishments, not effort

Letters for reference for men are more likely to emphasize accomplishments ('his research', 'his skills', or 'his career') while letters for women are 50% more likely to include 'grind-stone' adjectives that describe effort. 'Hard-working' associates with effort, but not ability.

We all share bias

It is important to remember that unconscious gender bias isn't a male problem. Research shows that women are just as susceptible to these common pitfalls as men. This is a problem for all of us - let's solve it together!

Keep it professional

Letters of reference for women are 7x more likely to mention personal life - something that is almost always irrelevant for the application. Also make sure you use formal titles and surnames for both men and women.

Stay away from stereotypes

Although they describe positive traits, adjectives like 'caring', 'compassionate', and 'helpful' are used more frequently in letters for women and can evoke gender stereotypes which can hurt a candidate. And be careful not to invoke these stereotypes directly ('she is not emotional').

Be careful raising doubt

We all want to write honest letters, but negative or irrelevant comments, such as 'challenging personality' or 'I have confidence that she will become better than average' are twice as common in letters for female applicants. Don't add doubt unless it is strictly necessary!

Adjectives to avoid: Adjectives to include:

caring	successful
compassionate	excellent
hard-working	accomplished
conscientious	outstanding
dependable	skilled
diligent	knowledgeable
dedicated	insightful
tactful	resourceful
interpersonal	confident
warm	ambitious
helpful	independent
	intellectual

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Research from Trix, F & Psenka, C. Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty. *Discourse & Society*, 2003; and Madera, JM, Hebl, MR, & Martin, RC. Gender and letters of Recommendation for Academia: Agentive and Communal Differences. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2009.



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Examples of Bias in Letters to Watch Out For

The following are types of bias to watch out for in letters.

1. Length of Letters and Level of Assurance
2. Use of Gender in the Letter
3. Doubt Raisers
4. Stereotypical Language
5. Grindstone Language

Research Study Details

The following sections describe examples of the types of bias listed above, which were found in "Exploring the Color of Glass: Letters of Recommendation for Female and Male Medical Faculty" [1]. The article discusses the results of a study that analyzed 312 letters of recommendation written from 1992 to 1995 for applicants of 103 faculty positions at an American medical school. The level of positions included assistant, adjunct, associate, and full professor. The letters analyzed in this study were for successful applicants, with approximately three letters written per applicant. Of the analyzed letters, 71% were for men and 29% were for women. Further, 85% of letters were written by men and only 12% by women. Results of the analysis include findings regarding how often each type of bias was detected in male and female letters of recommendation. Examples and findings for each bias category are given below.

1. Length of Letters and Level Assurance

- Recommendation letters for women are often shorter than those for men.
- Shorter letters are often associated with minimum assurance.
- To achieve full or maximum assurance, a letter of recommendation will include:
 - Commitment and relationship of recommender with the applicant
 - Specificity of focus and record of applicant
 - Evaluation or comparison of traits and accomplishments

- Anything less is considered minimal assurance.
- Sample letter:

Dear Dr. Alfred Koop:

I have known Sarah as a resident and as staff at The Metropolitan Hospital. She is knowledgeable, pleasant, and easy to get along with. I have no hesitation in recommending her for a faculty position at Centvingcingq. I will be happy to answer any further questions in this regard.

Charles Lewis, MD, Chairman, Department of Psychiatry

- This letter shows commitment and relationship to applicant but that's all, making it a letter of minimal assurance.
- FINDINGS: 15% for women's and 6% for men's letters

2. Use of Gender in the Letter

- The following are examples of the use of gender in letters:
 - Dr. Simpson is a thorough, hardworking, extremely intelligent and insightful woman.
 - On a personal level Sarah is, in my opinion, the quintessence of the contemporary lady physician who very ably combines dedication, intelligence, idealism, compassion, and responsibility without compromise.
 - I believe Dr. Smith to be a man of great personal integrity.
 - He is entirely dedicated to patient care, personable, a gentleman in every sense of the word.
- FINDINGS: 10% for women's and 5% for men's letters

3. Doubt Raisers

- Negative Language
 - **While** Sarah has not done a lot of this type of research...
 - **Although** his publications are not numerous...
- Hedges
 - It **appears** her health and personal life is stable.
 - He **appears** to be a highly motivated colleague
- Potential Negative
 - An independent worker, she **requires only a minimum of supervision.**
 - Bright, enthusiastic, he **responds well to feedback.**
- FINDINGS: 24% of women's and 12% of men's letters had at least one doubt raiser

4. Stereotypical Language

- The following are examples of stereotypical language:
 - Dr. (William) Smith has been very **successful** in obtaining grants from both the NIH (National Institute of Health) and industry and has developed an excellent clinical trials group for the study and treatment of AIDS.
 - His substantial record of publication in reputable journals, during those developing years, certainly attests to his overall research capabilities and **accomplishments.**
 - Dr. (Sarah) Simpson is a caring, **compassionate** physician who has excellent interpersonal relationships with patients and their families as well as nursing and medical staff
- FINDINGS: 16% of women and 4% of men's letters had at least one of these

5. Grindstone Language

- Grindstone language includes adjectives that describe applicants as hard-working, and are more often used to imply effort for women and ability for men [2]
- The following examples of grindstone language:
 - She is an extremely conscientious and meticulous researcher who devotes her time to laboratory work and the training of graduate students in laboratory technique.
 - She is a superb experimentalist – very well organized, thorough and careful in her approach to research.
 - I have found William to be hard-working, thorough, and conscientious in providing all aspects of patient care.
- FINDINGS: 34% of women's and 23% of men's letters had grindstone language

References

- [1] Trix, F. & Psenka, C. (2003). Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty. *Discourse & Society*, 14(2), 191-220.
- [2] Barker, L. (2010). Avoiding Unintended Gender Bias in Letters of Recommendation. National Center for Women & Information Technology, Case Study 1



Best Practices for Reading and Writing Letters of Recommendation

A letter of recommendation for an academic position or promotion provides an overall assessment of the candidate's potential to excel in the new position: the *professional promise* and *evidence* to support that assessment. Useful letters of recommendation include the following elements:

1. focus on the applicant (and can include the commitment and relationship of the writer to the applicant)
2. description of the applicant's record
3. evaluation of accomplishments of the applicant
4. discussion of personal characteristics only to the extent that they predict potential growth and job performance.

Omission of one or more of these components provides the reader/evaluator only a limited understanding of the candidate's qualifications and is a "letter of minimal assurance."

Decide on what is valued for the position and what language is important to the discipline based on those criteria. Keep those criteria consistently in mind when deciding how much weight to give letters.

Letters may be biased in systematically racial or gendered ways. Both men and women, caucasians and people of color may apply and share the same assumptions. Learn to recognize:

❖ Descriptive words that may be used differently in evaluating members of different social groups:

- Grindstone adjectives (*hardworking, conscientious, dependable, meticulous, thorough, diligent, dedicated, careful*) are sometimes used more for women, implying that women succeed more through effort than through ability.
- Ability traits (*talented, smart, able, capable, brilliant*)
- Communal adjectives (*affectionate, nurturing, kind, warm*) are negatively associated with hireability.
- Agentic adjectives (*ambitious, dominant, self confident*)
- Standout adjectives (*excellent, superb outstanding, unique, unparalleled*) are often repeated more for men than women

❖ Descriptive phrases can unintentionally influence a reader

- Using first names for women or minority faculty and titles for men: "*Joan was an asset to our department.*" vs. "*Dr. Smith was an asset to our department.*"
- Gendered adjectives: "*Dr. Sarah Gray is a caring compassionate physician.*" vs. "*Dr. Joel Gray has been very successful with his patients.*"
- Doubt Raisers or negative language: "*although her publications are not numerous*" or "*while not the best student I have had s/he...*" Letters for women have been shown to contain twice as many doubt raisers than letters for men.
- Potentially negative language "*s/he requires only minimal supervision*" or "*s/he is totally intolerant of shoddy research*"
- Faint Praise: "*S/he worked hard on projects that s/he was assigned.*" or "*S/he has never had temper tantrums.*"
- Hedges: "*S/he responds well to feedback.*"
- Irrelevancy: "*S/he is an avid skier and stamp collector.*"
- Unnecessarily invoking a stereotype "*She is not overly emotional*" or "*he is very confident, yet not arrogant*" or "*She is extremely productive, especially as someone who attended inner city schools and a large state university.*"