

Strategies to Avoid Bias in Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are an important component of students' applications for residency, research fellowships, dual degree programs and other opportunities. Unfortunately, research shows that letters of recommendation at all levels of training and professional life commonly reflect biases that disadvantage women and students from groups underrepresented in medicine (UIM).¹⁻⁶ This bias occurs regardless of the gender or other characteristics of the letter writer. We recommend utilizing this checklist to avoid potential bias in your recommendation letters.

Letter of Recommendation Checklist	
Avoid:	Remember To:
<p>Gendered language</p> <p>Describing men based on knowledge, skills, abilities, talent and women based only on their work effort, personality or interpersonal traits: caring, compassionate, hard-working, conscientious, dependable, diligent, dedicated, tactful, interpersonal, warm, helpful</p> <p>Fact: "Letters 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 'grindstone' adjectives that describe effort or focus on interpersonal relationships"^{1, 4}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe ALL students based on their knowledge, skills, and abilities: successful, accomplished, skilled, knowledgeable, insightful, resourceful, confident, ambitious, independent, intellectual Review letters for gendered language and correct it Be consistent when writing comments that are negative or cast doubt. Although these comments can be a useful or necessary component of a letter, they are more likely to be seen in letters for women ¹
<p>Superlatives</p> <p>Describing men or non-UIM students with superlatives (best, brightest, great, wonderful) and using faint praise such as 'competent' or 'adequate' for women and UIM students</p> <p>Fact: "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')"^{1, 5}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use superlative language consistently for all students based on their performance and accomplishments
<p>Personal life presented in biased way</p> <p>Describing women's personal lives more than men's</p> <p>Fact: "Letters of reference for women are 7x more likely to mention personal life - something that is almost always irrelevant for the application"¹</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you feel it would be helpful to mention a student's personal or family life in a letter, check in with the student before including Use a consistent approach in discussing the personal lives of all students Be consistent with using formal titles in your letters
<p>Discrepancies in letter length</p> <p>Letters written for women faculty and fellowship candidates are shorter than letters for men.⁴</p> <p>Fact: "On average, letters for men are 16% longer than letters for women"^{1, 4}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the length of your letters. Are your letters of similar length for women and men, students of different race/ethnicities, and for others underrepresented in medicine?

References

1. University of Arizona Commission on the Status of Women. Avoiding gender bias in reference writing. 2. Akos P, Kretchmar J. Gender and ethnic bias in letters of recommendation: considerations for school counselors. ASCA Professional School Counselor. 20016-17;20:102-13. 3. Madera J et al. Gender and letters of recommendation for academia: Agentive and communal differences. Journal of Applied Psychology. 2009;94:1591-9. 4. Trix F, Psenka C. Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty. Discourse and Society. 2003;14:191-220. 5. Dutt K et al. Gender differences in recommendation letters for postdoctoral fellowships in geoscience. Nature Geoscience. 2016;16:805-9. 6. Gender bias calculator. <https://www.tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/>