



SEAS Center for Women in Engineering

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Faculty Handouts

Reading and Writing Reference Letters

Letters of reference are part of the typical duties for university faculty: reading letters and writing letters. Extensive research reports that letters written about men and women are different; women are at a disadvantage even when their resumes and abilities are essentially the same as men. This holds across disciplines.

The key findings include the fact that letters of reference for women are shorter than those for men seeking the same position, with essentially the same qualifications. Letters for women often reported their reliability and meticulous work, while letters for men noted their brilliance, star and exceptional qualities. Are the women not talented but only hardworking?

When letters for men and women were of the same length and even balanced in terms of “brilliance” and “reliability”, letters for men noted many more “brilliance” qualities. And, women’s letters, more than those for men, noted nurturing, mentoring activities.

Do these subtle issues influence faculty as reference letters are read by search committees? It is hard not to notice letters indicating exceptional abilities. And, while search committees read many letters, they are not reading 100s and not focusing on the comparisons found in the research studies.

What to do? Stewart and Valian (2018) suggest creating a plan on how to create a medium and a short list of candidates at the same time the advertisement is crafted. Without a plan, potential influences or unconscious biases enter: prestigious schools over objective resume review, well known advisors, etc. A modifiable template candidate review plan developed by the university of Michigan is a good example of how to start.

Writing reference letters is also a faculty responsibility, whether for students or for other faculty. The same unconscious biases that are part of the reference letters we read can creep into the letters we write. The following, adapted from the University of Arizona, is a short guide on preparing reference letters.

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!

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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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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
compassionate
hard-working
conscientious
dependable
diligent
dedicated
tactful
interpersonal
warm
helpful

successful
excellent
accomplished
outstanding
skilled
knowledgeable
insightful
resourceful
confident
ambitious
independent
intellectual

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References:

Stewart, A.j. and Valian, V., *An Inclusive Academy*, MIT Press, July 2018

Trix F., Psenka C., *Exploring the Color of Glass: Letters of Recommendation for Female and Male Medical Faculty. Discourse and Society*, March 2003