

# Guidelines for Reference Letters



These guidelines highlight the do's and don'ts of reading and writing reference letters. Reference letters are used to evaluate candidates for jobs and promotions; however, there are known biases in how these letters are written for different groups of people. It is important to avoid these biases in order to equalize applicant review. When writing or reading a letter of reference use the following guidelines to help reduce your unconscious biases.



## Writing

- ✓ Undergo bias training to be aware of how biases play a role in letter writing.
- ✓ Ask the person for whom you are writing the letter for a list of information: along with deadline and purpose, ask what specifically should be included and what they want you to highlight.
- ✓ Use a gender bias calculator (e.g., <https://www.tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/>) to determine if your letter is unconsciously biased.
- ✓ Know that use of “standout” adjectives (e.g., best, ideal) are more commonly used to describe men than women<sup>1</sup>; beware of your use of such words.
- ✓ Know that “communal” words (e.g., affectionate, helpful, kind, agreeable) can be interpreted as less important than “agentic” words (e.g., assertive, confident, ambitious, independent). Communal words have a negative effect on hiring and are more commonly used to describe women<sup>2</sup>.
- ✓ Don't use gendered terms (e.g., she is a fantastic female scientist), keep the letter gender neutral if possible (e.g., they are a fantastic scientist).
- ✓ Use gender pronouns as requested/desired (e.g., he/him; she/her; they/them).
- ✓ Keep in mind “advocacy bias”; a letter writer is more likely to write a strong letter for someone similar to themselves<sup>3</sup>.
- ✓ Keep in mind that letter length may be interpreted as a measure of quality, so it's important to consider that a short letter may not come across as positively as you think.
- ✓ Be honest with referees requesting a letter: turn down applicants if you can't write a strong letter.
- ✓ Scan your letter for ambiguous or outwardly negative statements that could raise doubt<sup>4</sup>.
- ✓ Print letter to review and/or read aloud to assess quality before submission.

## Reading

- ✓ Undergo bias training to be aware of how biases play a role in letter writing and keep in mind that the writer may not have been aware of their internal biases.
- ✓ Using communal words to describe an applicant is a good thing as it is valuable to have warm/caring/tactful people.
- ✓ Contact the letter writer if the letter is unclear or insufficient to evaluate the candidate.
- ✓ Keep in mind that length doesn't relate to the quality of candidate.
- ✓ Note that different cultures and people may have different standards for what constitutes a good letter.
- ✓ Allow sufficient time to review all applicants' recommendation letters to the same extent.
- ✓ Don't discount letters from early career researchers or people who aren't considered leaders in their field.

<sup>1</sup>PMID:18953419 <sup>2</sup>PMID: 19916666 <sup>3</sup>URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/10027/15691>

<sup>4</sup>DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926503014002277>

