

# 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 to equalize applicant review. When writing or reading a letter of reference use the following guidelines to help reduce your unconscious biases.

## Writing

- ✓ 1. Undergo bias training to be aware of how biases play a role in letter writing.
- ✓ 2. Ask the person for whom you are writing the letter for a list of information: along with deadline and purpose, ask what should be specifically included and what they want you to highlight.
- ✓ 3. Use a gender bias calculator (e.g. <https://www.tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/>) to determine if your letter is unconsciously biased.
- ✗ 4. Be aware of the use of “standout” adjectives (e.g. best, ideal) as these are more commonly used to describe men than women<sup>1</sup>.
- ✗ 5. Keep in mind that “communal” words such as: affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, sensitive, nurturing, agreeable, interpersonal, warm, caring, and tactful can be interpreted as less important than “agentic” words such as: assertive, confident, aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, daring, outspoken, and intellectual. Communal words have a negative effect on hiring and are more commonly used to describe women<sup>2</sup>.
- ✗ 6. Don't use gendered terms (e.g. she is a fantastic woman scientist), keep the letter gender neutral if possible (e.g. fantastic scientist).
- ✓ 7. Use gender pronouns as requested/desired (e.g. he/him; she/her; they/them).
- ✓ 8. Keep in mind “advocacy bias”; a letter writer is more likely to write a strong letter for someone more similar to themselves<sup>3</sup>.
- ✓ 9. 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 strong as you think.
- ✓ 10. Be honest with referees requesting a letter: Turn down applicants if you can't write a strong letter.
- ✓ 11. Scan your letter for ambiguous or outwardly negative statements that could raise doubt<sup>4</sup>.
- ✓ 12. Print letter and/or read aloud to assess quality.

## Reading

- ✓ 1. 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.
- ✓ 2. Using communal words to describe an applicant is a good thing as it is highly valued to have a warm/caring/tactful person.
- ✓ 3. Contact the letter writer if the letter is unclear or insufficient for evaluating the candidate.
- ✓ 4. Keep in mind that length doesn't equal quality of candidate.
- ✓ 5. Different cultures and people may have different standards for what constitutes a good letter.
- ✓ 6. Allow sufficient time to review all applicants to the same extent.
- ✗ 7. Don't discount letters from early career researchers or people who aren't considered as the leaders in your 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>

