

UConn

UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT



Tips for Writing Letters of Recommendation
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Agenda

- **Challenges**
- **Communication**
- **Content**
- **unConscious Bias**
- **Code Words & Phrases**
- **Conclusions**

- **Sample letters from [https://www.e-](https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline)**

[education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline](https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline)



John A. Dutton
e-Education Institute

WRITING RECOMMENDATION LETTERS ONLINE





What types of letters are you usually asked to write?

What challenges you when writing letters of recommendation?





Communication with the letter requestor

- **Can you write a strong letter for the applicant?**
- **What are some things to consider?**





Communication with the letter requestor

- **It is OK to say no.**
 - Too close to the deadline
 - You know you don't have the time
 - You don't know the student well enough
 - You cannot be emphatically positive
 - Request is unprofessional
- Adapted from <https://funding.yale.edu/faculty-staff-recommenders/writing-letters>





Communication with the letter requestor

- **Request Information**
 - **Deadline**
 - **Details about the request**
 - **Purpose**
 - **Program**
 - **Instructions – criteria of competition**
 - **Recipient**
 - **Submission process**





Communication with the letter requestor

- **Request Information**
 - **Current Materials**
 - **Resume**
 - **Personal statement**
 - **Details about related projects**
 - **Unofficial transcript**
 - **Bullet points of things to include**





Communication with the letter requestor

- **Don't ask students to draft their own letters.**





Format

- **Length**
- **Letterhead & Date**
- **Address & Greeting**
- **Text formatting**
 - **Font**
 - 10 – 12
 - Standard publishing such as New Times Roman or Century
 - **Single Space**
 - **Skip lines between paragraphs**
- **Closing**

Adapted from <https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline>

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Letter Content

- **What makes a strong letter?**





Letter Content -- What makes a strong letter?

- **Credibility**
 - Explain how you know the applicant
 - Provide clear evidence
 - Limit your letter to what you know
- **Focus on the applicant**
 - Examples of what the applicant has done
 - Merits of the proposed research project, course of study, etc.
 - Positive impact on the student





Letter Content -- What makes a strong letter?

- **Start strong**
 - Executive summary
- **Details & examples**
- **Avoid**
 - Summarizing resume
 - Unsupported praise
 - Faint praise
 - Implying criticism





Unconscious Bias

WHAT IS BIAS?

- ❖ **Explicit Bias** is attitudes and beliefs we have about a person or group on a conscious level
- ❖ **Unconscious/Implicit Bias** is unintended, subtle, and subconscious thoughts that happen to all of us, all of the time

“We’d like to believe we are open-minded, fair, and without bias, but research shows otherwise. This is an important, even if uncomfortable, realization for most of us.”

— MAHZARIN BANAJI

Author, *Blind Spots: Hidden Biases of Good People*



Bias in letters

- **Trix & Penska (2003)**
 - More “standout” adjectives for males
 - Differences in use of possessive phrases
 - Men – researchers & professionals (his research)
 - Women – teachers and students (her teaching)





Bias in letters

- **Madera, Helb, & Martin (2009)**
 - **Women described as more communal and with less agency**
- **Dutt, Pfaff, Bernstein, Dillard, & Block (2016)**
 - **Women half as likely to receive excellent letters**





Bias in letters

- **Houser & Lemmons (2018)**
 - Non-white students described with more affect words and positive emotions
 - White students described in terms of cognitive ability, insight, and productivity

- **Gender bias calculator**

<http://slowe.github.io/genderbias>





Graduate Student Janet letter

Female-biased (51%)

Female-associated words

student ×8
course ×6
work ×3
educational
Students ×2
courses ×5
classes
course,
class ×2
students,
responsibility ×2
students ×3
student-run
teaching
educational materials
workbook
thorough analysis
efforts. I
colleagues
working

Male-associated words

project ×3
excellent
best
sciences
exceptionally
skills
able
projects
results
tested
capable
skills, focus,





Additional Code Words & Phrases

- **Highest**
 - “my highest recommendation”
 - “most enthusiastically and without reservations”
 - “very strongly”
- **Strong**
 - “strongly”
- **Qualified**
 - “I am writing to recommend...”
 - Adapted from www.umich.edu/mmanty/resources/recommendations/html





Other considerations

- **Define terms**
- **Privacy issues and FERPA**
 - Refrain from referring to the student's protected classification information (e.g. race, national origin, religion, gender, physical disability, marital status and age)





Other considerations

- **Privacy issues and FERPA**
 - **DO NOT** share information from student educational records, including grades or grade point averages, with parents or others outside the institution, including in letters of recommendation, without written permission from the student.
 - <https://ferpa.uconn.edu/forms/>





Other considerations

- **Talk to the student if you are considering using an example that may reveal personal information**





Efficiency

- **Consider posting your recommendation policy**
- **Consider a basic structure**
 - **Intro**
 - **Academic Substance**
 - **Character and personal examples**
 - **Summary**





10 Commandments for Writing Recommendation Letters

- <https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline/node/31>

