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-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline
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](https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline)
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
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](http://slowe.github.io/genderbias)
### Graduate Student Janet Letter

**Female-biased (51%)**

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<th>Male-associated words</th>
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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/](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](https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline/node/31)