Tips for Writing Letters of Recommendation

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Outline of session

• Reasons for writing a letter
• Challenges
• Communication
• Content
• Unconscious Bias
• Code Words & Phrases
• Conclusions
Opening reflection

What types of letters are you usually asked to write?

What challenges you when writing letters of recommendation?

Please put responses in the chat.
Things to weigh before agreeing

• #1: Can you write a strong letter for the applicant?

• What are some other things to consider? (please unmute and speak or use the chat)
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

• If you do agree, request information
  – Deadline
  – Details about the request
    • Purpose
    • Program
    • Instructions – criteria of competition
    • Recipient
    • Submission process
• **Request Information, continued…**
  – **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
Calls for letters

- Goldwater Scholarship program example:
  https://goldwaterscholarship.gov/letter-writing-guidance-recommenders/
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
Sample letters

https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline/node/137
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

  - 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
### Graduate Student Janet letter

#### Female-biased (51%)

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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)
• **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
Additional resources

- https://diversity.uconn.edu/recommendations/#
10 Commandments for Writing Recommendation Letters

• [https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline/node/31](https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline/node/31)
Thank you for attending!

Q&A

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