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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 - polls

What types of letters are you usually asked to write?

What challenges you when writing letters of recommendation?





Things to weigh before agreeing

- **#1: Can you write a strong letter for the applicant?**
- **What are some other 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

- **If you do agree, request information**
 - **Deadline**
 - **Details about the request**
 - **Purpose**
 - **Program***
 - **Instructions – criteria of competition**
 - **Recipient**
 - **Submission process**





Communication with the letter requestor

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





Poll

Has a recommender ever asked you to write your own letter of recommendation for their signature?





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> 10





Calls for letters

- **Goldwater example**





Letter Content

What makes a strong letter? - one word poll

Reflections on the sample letters





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 resumé
 - 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...”





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

do encourage students to waive access privileges

do meet the deadline

don't make discriminatory comments

don't use negative, ambiguous, or seemingly coded language

do provide examples that uplift and humanize

don't speak beyond your experience or make malicious claims

don't use the letter to hype yourself, the school, or the program

don't do this for gratitude or payback!

do offer credible praise and, if invited, even-handed criticism

avoid exaggeration & clichés





Thank you for attending!

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