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UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT



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**

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Opening reflection - polls

What types of letters are you usually asked to write?

What challenges you when writing letters of recommendation?

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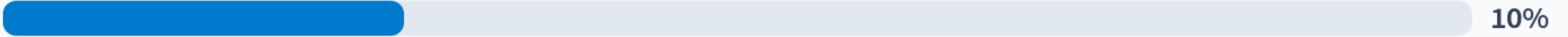
What types of letters are you usually asked to write?

A for a job



38%

B for an internship



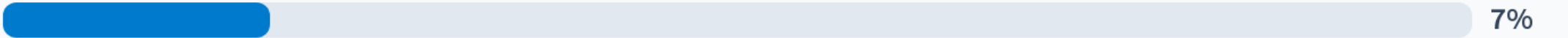
10%

C for graduate school



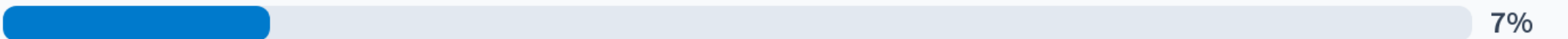
38%

D for PTR (promotion and tenure review)



7%

Other



7%

What challenges you when writing letters of recommendation?

Making them specific and compelling.





Things to weigh before agreeing

- **#1: Can you write a strong letter for the applicant?**
- **What are some other things to consider?** (please respond in the chat or raise your hand to unmute)

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Communication with the letter requestor

- **Sometimes, it's OK to say no!**
 - Too close to the deadline
 - Request is unprofessional
 - You know you don't have the time
 - You don't know the student well enough*
 - You cannot be emphatically positive*

– 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/Opportunity**
 - **Instructions – *criteria of competition***
 - **Student applicant**
 - **LOR Submission process**





Communication with the letter requestor

- **Request Information, continued...**
 - **Current Materials**
 - **Résumé**
 - **Personal statement (if applicable)**
 - **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?



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

A YES



B NO





Communication with the letter requestor

- **Don't ask students to draft their own letters.**
 - **This is more common in some disciplines than others, but it's always bad practice.**
- **That said, feel free to bring students into the process (if comfortable).**





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> 13





Calls for letters

- **Calls for letters often include important guidance or direction about information to include**
- **Goldwater example**



What makes a strong letter?

It speaks directly and concretely to the award/opportunity criteria!





Letter Content

Reflections on sample letters

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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





AI text generators

AI text generators can help you write a letter.

Do not put student name or identifiable information into the prompt.

There are bias detection tools that may give you useful feedback on your letter.

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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/>





Additional Code Words & Phrases

- **Highest**
 - “my highest recommendation”
 - “most enthusiastically and without reservations”
 - “very strongly”
- **Strong**
 - “strongly”
- **Qualified**
 - “I am writing to recommend...”





Graduate Student Janet letter: Female-biased (51%)

Female-associated words

student x8
course x6
work x3
educational
Students x2
courses x5
classes
course,
class x2
students,
responsibility x2
students x3
student-run
teaching
educational materials
workbook
thorough analysis
efforts. I
colleagues
working

Male-associated words

project x3
excellent
best
sciences
exceptionally
skills
able
projects
results
tested
capable
skills, focus,





Other considerations

- **Privacy issues and FERPA**
 - Try to 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 – *especially if that information is not included elsewhere in the application.*
- <https://ferpa.uconn.edu/forms/>

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Efficiency

- **Consider posting your recommendation policy on syllabus or department profile**
- **Consider a basic structure**
 - **Intro**
 - **Academic Substance**
 - **Character and personal examples**
 - **Summary**

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Other considerations

- **Communication is the key**
 - **Talk to the student if you are considering using an example that may reveal personal information in your letter.**





Additional Resources

10 Commandments for Writing Recommendation Letters

Penn State e-Education Institute

do encourage students to waive access privileges

do meet the deadline

don't speak beyond your experience or make malicious claims

don't make discriminatory comments

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

do provide examples that uplift and humanize

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

avoid exaggeration & clichés

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

don't do this for gratitude or payback!





Thank you for attending!

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