Tips for Writing Letters of Recommendation

Vin Moscardelli, Office of National Scholarships & Fellowships
Tina Huey, she/her, CETL
Jonelle Reynolds, Office for Diversity and Inclusion
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?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A for a job</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B for an internship</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C for graduate school</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D for PTR (promotion and tenure review)</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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)
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: 36%
- B NO: 64%
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
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!
Reflections on 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
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.
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%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female-associated words</th>
<th>Male-associated words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>student ×8</td>
<td>project ×3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>course ×6</td>
<td>excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work ×3</td>
<td>best</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>educational</td>
<td>sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students ×2</td>
<td>exceptionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>courses ×5</td>
<td>skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classes</td>
<td>able</td>
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<tr>
<td>course,</td>
<td>projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>class ×2</td>
<td>results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students,</td>
<td>tested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsibility ×2</td>
<td>capable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students ×3</td>
<td>skills, focus,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student-run</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>teaching</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>educational materials</td>
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<tr>
<td>workbook</td>
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<tr>
<td>thorough analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>efforts, I</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>colleagues</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>working</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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/](https://ferpa.uconn.edu/forms/)
Efficiency

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

**do** encourage students to waive access privileges

**do** meet the deadline

**do** provide examples that uplift and humanize

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

**don’t** speak beyond your experience or make malicious claims

**don’t** make discriminatory comments

**don’t** use negative, ambiguous, or seemingly coded language

**don’t** do this for gratitude or payback!

**avoid** exaggeration & clichés

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

Penn State e-Education Institute
Thank you for attending!

jonelle.reynolds@uconn.edu
vin.moscardelli@uconn.edu
tina.huey@uconn.edu