

Avoiding hidden messages: Strategies to reduce implicit bias in recommendation and reference letters

Purpose: to provide evaluators the most useful and accurate possible letter for applicants/candidates.

Language used in recommendation letters for job applicants differs between men and women in several ways:

- **Length**: Letters for men are 16% longer than letters for women (Trix & Psenka 2003)
- **Standout terms** “superb”, “outstanding”, “remarkable”, “exceptional” male more than female (Schmader *et al.* 2007). Used even less frequently for racialized people (Boatright *et al.*, 2017).
- **Grindstone terms (v. stand-out terms)**: hard-working - focus on effort, but not ability.
- **Tentative words** “she might”, “it is possible that she” female more than male (Isaac *et al.*, 2011)
- **Agentic terms** (influence, initiative, assertiveness-focused) **vs Communal terms** (relationship & welfare-focused) (Madera *et al.*, 2009)
- **Doubt Raisers** - phrases or words that question an applicant’s aptness for the job
 - Negativity “X doesn’t do much committee work”
 - Faint praise “needs only minimum help”
 - Hedging “who might not be the best teacher”
 - Irrelevant information “is an avid cross-country skier”

To avoid bias in your recommendation letters:²

- ✓ Have established criteria for particular types of letters & address only the criteria.
 - In particular, for professional activities, be consistent with attention to scholarship and professional productivity for all individuals for whom you write.
- ✓ Keep things evidence-based and share only direct observations (when possible).
 - Focus on research accomplishments and professional productivity, teaching, service and sympathy with the mission.
- ✓ Identify and evaluate accomplishments over effort (grindstone adjectives).
- ✓ Interpersonal skills are important, but keep them balanced with other characteristics.
- ✓ When describing stereotypically female traits, consider if the characteristics are relevant and if other applicable characteristics/achievements have been overlooked.
- ✓ Use titles and surnames consistently for all candidates/applicants.
- ✓ Avoid invoking a stereotype (“she is not too emotional” or “his English is very good”). Likewise, avoid referring to age, sex, disability, race, nationality or religion. Each of these, while most likely well-meaning can evoke bias in the reader.
- ✓ Avoid personal information.
- ✓ For a given type of letter, write letters of equal length for each applicant/candidate.
- ✓ Try the **Gender Bias Calculator**: <https://www.tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/>
Paste your letter in the window and it will list words more often associated with women and words more often associated with men.

References:

- Boatright, D. et al.**, 2017. Disparities in Medical Student Membership in the AOA Honor Society. *JAMA Intern Med.*
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- Schmader, T. et al.**, 2007. A linguistic comparison of letters of recommendation for male and female chemistry and biochemistry job applicants. *Sex Roles.* 57 (7-8), 509-514.
- Trix F. & Psenka, C.** 2003. Exploring the color of glass: letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty. *Discourse and Society.* 14: 191-220.

¹ Teachers Talking Sept. 6, 2018: Margaret Bloch Qazi & Thia Cooper, Kendall Center for Engaged Learning Faculty Associate for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion.

² Several suggestions come from: the University of Arizona’s Commission on the Status of Women: www.csw.arizona.edu/LORbias