

Avoiding Racial and Gender Bias When Writing Recommendation Letters

As students begin to explore new projects, job opportunities, or mentorships, they may seek a letter of recommendation from faculty. While the act of writing a recommendation letter for a student is often an important and rewarding gesture, it can also be a time-consuming and challenging exercise. Furthermore, research has shown that recommendation letters often include implicit bias and gendered language (Madera, Hebel, Martin, 2009). Although we have several resources on writing recommendation letters for students ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#)); below are a few suggestions to help you take a more inclusive and equitable approach to writing recommendation letters.

- **Consider what you need to write a compelling letter:** Writing a recommendation letter requires some skill. Below are [10 simple rules](#) to help you consider how to draft a recommendation letter that will best highlight the applicant and their qualifications. (Kong, Steele, Botham, 2021)
- **Provide Students a Recommendation Letter Checklist:** Some students may not have prior experience requesting recommendation letters; therefore, create a guide giving students specific information you will need. Give the guide out in advance and make it easily accessible to students. Include a link in your syllabi or on your departmental profile page. Also, direct all student advisees about your guide ahead of time. Although there are many examples of “recommendation letter guides” online, below is a [sample guide](#) to help you get started. (Orrison, 2006)
- **Avoiding gender bias:** Prioritize avoiding some of the common mistakes that perpetuate gender bias. Emphasize accomplishments and maintain a professional tone throughout your letter. Carefully consider using superlatives to showcase intellect, work ethic, temperament, and vigor. [Examples of common superlatives are below](#). (Madera, Hebi, & Martin, 2009; Peres & Garcia, 1962; Trix & Psenka, 2003)
- **Avoiding Racial Bias:** Avoid unconscious bias by keeping a professional tone; emphasizing qualifications and accomplishments; maintaining a high level of enthusiasm; and by checking for any phrases or language that reinforces stereotypes. (Kong, Steele, Botham, 2021)
- **If possible, have a conversation with students:** Establishing and reestablishing personal connections with students is an important component in being a supportive and culturally competent educator. CASEL offers an excellent guide for a 5-minute chat that can help you learn about your student’s experiences and perspectives. This simple structured conversation can help you build trust and learn more about your students. [\[Link\]](#)

If you would like to talk with someone about strategies for writing recommendation letters for students, please consider scheduling a confidential consultation with someone from the Reinert Center [\[Link\]](#)

Resources

Kong J. H., Steele L. J., Botham, C. M. (2021). Ten simple rules for writing compelling recommendation letters. *PLoS Comput Biol* 17(2): e1008656.

Madera, J. M., Hebl, M. R., & Martin, R. C. (2009). Gender and letters of recommendation for academia: agentic and communal differences. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 94(6), 1591.

Orrison Jr, M. E. (2006). Teaching Time Savers: A Recommendation for Recommendations. *FOCUS* 26.5 (2006): 20

Peres, S. H., & Garcia, J. R. (1962). Validity and dimensions of descriptive adjectives used in reference letters for engineering applicants. *Personnel Psychology*, 15(3), 279–286.

Trix, F., & Psenka, C. (2003). Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty. *Discourse & Society*, 14(2), 191-220.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at cttl@slu.edu.

Superlatives Commonly Used in Recommendation Letters

Intellect	Work Ethic	Temperament	Vigor
imaginative insightful intelligent discerning knowledgeable original analytical far-sighted logical skilled astute adaptable resourceful self-reliant thoughtful judicious perceptive inquisitive bright	precise persistent resolute serious committed orderly prompt efficient responsible persevering sure alert businesslike thorough confident tenacious hard-working methodical determined	good-natured likable considerate affable patient tolerant composed restrained earnest bold gregarious polished adventurous team-oriented spirited sociable open frank assured	active energetic self-starting enthusiastic vigorous pace-setting eager diligent zealous fast productive enterprising certain speedy self-driving independent ambitious on-the-ball industrious

(Peres & Garcia, 1962)

Sample Recommendation Letter Checklist for Students

Adapted from Michael Orrison, Professor of Mathematics, Harvey Mudd College

If I have agreed to write a recommendation letter for you, please email the following information at least two weeks before the letter is due:

- A copy of your personal statement and other application essays if applicable
- A copy of your unofficial transcript
- A copy of your resume or CV
- Specify whether you need a physical copy or provide details on where to send the letter electronically.

In the same email, please answer the following questions:

- What is your name, graduation year, and major?
- For what program/position/honor/award are you apply and when is the application due?
- What does the program/position/honor/award suggest recommenders address?
- How long have I know you (in years and months), and what is my relationship to you (instructor, research advisor, faculty mentor, etc.0?
- For what class(es) have I had you, what final grade(s) did I assign you, and how did you distinguish yourself in my class(es)?
- How would you describe yourself? What are your strengths?
- What are some of your academic and non-academic accomplishments?
- What makes me particularly qualified to write a letter for you?
- What makes you particularly qualified for this program/position/honor/award?
- What are your goals and how will this program/position/honor/award help?

Please send an email reminder to me as the deadline approaches and please let me know of other ways to make this process go as smoothly as possible for you and me.

Tips for Faculty on Recommendation Writing

1. Gather relevant information of the applicant
2. Allow sufficient time to write
3. Provide context for why you are a suitable letter writer
4. Address the requirements needed to be successful
5. Be memorable by adding illustrative anecdotes
6. Quantify by comparing applicant to peers
7. Keep it professional
8. Maintain a level of high enthusiasm
9. Express your willingness to help further
10. Edit and proofread

Kong J. H., Steele L. J., Botham, C. M. (2021). Ten simple rules for writing compelling recommendation letters. *PLoS Comput Biol* 17(2): e1008656.