WRITING AND EVALUATING
LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

DID YOU KNOW?

Below are examples from the research that demonstrate observed differences in the writing and interpretation of letters of recommendation according to identity characteristics. In the studies cited:

- People wrote better letters of recommendation for people who were similar to them with respect to gender and personality;[1]

- The least persuasive letters of recommendation written for women often portrayed them as less professional and capable, while minimizing or omitting their professional achievements and personal qualities;[2]

- It was more common for a woman to receive a letter of minimal assurance (a brief letter missing important features) than for a man. Moreover, on average, male candidates received longer letters compared to female candidates;[2]

- Letters of recommendation written for women contained more features that raise doubt (e.g., negative wording: "although she isn't my best student…") than those written for men;[2]

- Women who wrote letters for other women were 16 times more likely to name the person informally (first name) than formally (title or last name),[3] which can affect the credibility of the application;[4]

- Letters of recommendation did not use the same vocabulary for men and for women;

  > Those written for men contain more adjectives associated with talent and skill (e.g., analytical), unlike those written for women;[5]

  > Women were more often described as conscientious and hard-working, while men are more often described as excellent and accomplished.[2]

- Similarly, important differences according to ethnicity were noted in the vocabulary that was used. White individuals were more likely to be described in strong terms such as "remarkable," "exceptional" and "best" than Black, Asian and Hispanic individuals were;[6]

- The characteristics most often associated with women in letters of recommendation (communal characteristics such as helpfulness, likeability, friendliness, sensitivity, tact, warmth and kindness) had a negative impact on university hiring decisions[7] (see the gendered expressions white paper for more information);

- It may have been difficult to address the issue of disabilities in letters of recommendation, since this difference risked being perceived as incompetence or a deficiency in the view of the evaluation committee;[8]

- Letters of recommendation were not all written the same way and contained different features depending on the culture;[9-12]

- A letter of recommendation may have been interpreted in different ways because of the cultural differences that may exist between the person writing the letter and the person reading it.[11]

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The following examples of practices associated with writing and reviewing letters of recommendation are provided for inspiration.

1 Writing letters of recommendation

BEFORE WRITING

Review the evaluation criteria and make sure that you know the candidate well enough before agreeing to write a letter of recommendation;[CWSE]

Make sure you have the time to write a quality letter of recommendation;[13]

If the recommendation cannot be honest or without reservation, suggest that the candidate approach another person in a better position to write the letter of recommendation;[14]

Ask the applicant to provide their updated application package to help you write a personalized and targeted letter.[2]

DURING WRITING

In order to make it more convincing, write the letter in a personalized way, avoiding as much as possible the "fill-in-the-blanks" templates that only require a few pieces of information (unless this is a requirement);[CWSE]

Name the person formally (full name or title) rather than informally (first name) to avoid affecting the application's credibility;[4]

Include all of the basic information generally expected in a good letter of recommendation (e.g., involvement and relationship between the person writing the letter and the recommended applicant, description of the application's work, an appraisal of their achievements, concrete examples to support claims) and address all the evaluation criteria;[2,13]

Present the ideas carefully. For example, if it is not your intent to do so, avoid including features that may cast doubt on the skills, qualifications or any other aspects of the candidate for the person reading the letter (e.g., negative wording or language with negative connotations);[2]

Refrain from using stereotypical elements (e.g., saying a woman is maternal) to describe the person;[13]

Use superlatives (adjectives that express a higher degree of quality; e.g., exceptional, excellent) regardless of the person's background, sex or gender.[13] However, to avoid discrediting the candidate, be careful not to overuse such words;[CWSE]

Leave out characteristics that could be considered discriminatory (e.g., nationality, culture, sexual orientation);[14]

From the beginning of the writing process, opt for gender-neutral writing and wording, as it is difficult to adapt a text that has been previously thought out and written in the generic masculine (see the guide available online [French only] for more information).

AFTER WRITING

Make sure that the letter does not imply either too detailed or too succinct a description of the person's skills. An optimal length will minimize the risk of containing features that cast doubt as well as of omitting important information (a short letter providing a good summary can be more effective than a long letter that lacks coherence);[2]

Assume an objective point of view by reflecting on whether the letter you've written would be the same for a person from a different culture or belonging to a different sex or gender.[13] Question your own biases and make sure that they did not impact[15] the writing of the letter.

- If in doubt about the content of a letter from a little-known or unknown culture, do not hesitate to contact the person who wrote the letter in order to validate their intention. This helps make sure the reader will correctly interpret the content;[11]

- Take the time to read the letters of recommendation carefully[16] and allow the same amount of time for each letter or application;[CWSE]

- Avoid automatically thinking that a longer letter is a more positive letter;[16]

- Learn about bias in letters of recommendation and pay special attention to this issue[15] (e.g., keep in mind that, compared to letters written for men, letters written for women may contain more features that raise doubt[2]).

FICTITIOUS EXAMPLES OF LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Example of a letter of minimal assurance

Dr. Alfred Koop,

It gives me great pleasure in writing this recommendation for Dr Sarah Gray. I have known Sarah as a resident and as staff at Mrahonod Metropolitan Hospital. She is knowledgeable, pleasant, and easy to get along with. I have no hesitation in recommending her for a faculty position at Centvingcinq. I will be happy to answer any further questions in this regard.

Charles Lewis, MD
Chairman, Department of Psychiatry

Example of a good short letter of recommendation

Dr. Koop,

I am pleased to recommend Dr Sarah Gray for faculty appointment as Clinical Assistant Professor. I have known Dr Gray for 8 years. She worked in research with me for 1 year and did fellowship training in our program for 2 years. She is a very good internist and endocrinologist. She is honest and reliable and of highest moral quality. She has good judgment in patient care and is very thoughtful and considerate towards those she is caring for. She is a good clinical teacher and should serve the department well in the capacity of instructing students and residents.

Charles Lewis, MD
Chairman, Department of Psychiatry

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. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0957926503014002277

ABOUT THE NSERC CHAIR FOR WOMEN IN SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING IN QUEBEC

The mission of the Chair for Women in Science and Engineering (CWSE) in Quebec is to increase the representation of women and maintain their participation in the field of science and engineering (SE). The Chair's first action area is to work with girls and the people close to them to present and demystify the opportunities that SE has to offer. The Chair also works with students and professionals to better equip them to overcome the obstacles that continue to affect their careers. Moreover, the Chair works with several communities to rally efforts around equity, diversity and inclusion in higher education and research. The Chair's second action area is to conduct research to understand and raise awareness of this issue. In this way, it helps propose potential solutions to the various authorities involved, with a view to driving change.

ABOUT UNIVERSITÉ DE SHERBROOKE

In its 2018–2022 strategic plan, Université de Sherbrooke committed to becoming an exemplary environment with respect to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). This commitment has resulted in the adoption of a related action plan, which is under the direct responsibility of the rector. Implementation of this plan is supported by the Executive Committee, the EDI Strategic Committee and all its working committees, and by several influential members of our community. The university is proud to be able to count on the leadership of the Chair for Women in Science and Engineering, which is contributing to this objective by developing a series of EDI-related training and tools, thereby strengthening our academic community.

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