

## Activity: Bias in a Faculty Letter of Reference

In the sample letter below, a number of biases based on common research findings have been embedded. As you read, identify biases (including omissions, overstatements, misrepresentations, systemic biases, and others). What would you suggest to create a letter of reference that invites highly qualified candidates from diverse backgrounds? How might you respond if you received a letter of reference that seemed biased?

Dear Search Committee,

I'm glad to write this letter for Letitia Brown. Letitia is a student of mine and has been working in my lab for several years. As her advisor, we have worked fairly closely together over time.

Letitia has done a fairly good job in her lab work in spite of some bumps along the way. Though she struggled to manage her emotions in the lab at first, with some help from the other lab assistants she was able to function pretty well in that environment and even occasionally take the lead on some experiments. It has been hard for her to balance her responsibilities at home as a single mother, but she tries. She has worked very hard to learn the required technical skills and she now can perform them most of the time.

Letitia is a pleasant, supportive student in our department. The students love her kind and caring nature and apparent ability to explain some of the scientific concepts clearly. She has been a hard worker here too, often taking on extra tutorial sessions—another example of her generosity. She has even been known to bring in some delicious baked goods—in addition to the ones she bakes for her son's school class!—which certainly enhances her contributions to our work.

She is nearly done her research and has worked very hard and diligently to meet our requirements. I am pleased that, at last, she will be graduating and certainly hope that she will have an opportunity to find work in this field. She is quite interested in her topic and believes she has something to offer the field.

Please let me know if you have any more questions about Letitia. I will certainly miss seeing her smiling face around our halls.

Sincerely,

Alan Winterbottom

# Bias in Letters of Reference—Information and Solutions

## Resources

- Tips: [Avoiding gender bias in in reference writing](#)
- [CRC tips](#) on avoiding bias in writing letters of reference
- 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), pp. 1591–1599. <http://tinyurl.com/y9dzt6kv>; DOI: 10.1037/a0016539
- Schmader, T., Whitehead, J. & Wysocki, V.H. (2007). A Linguistic Comparison of Letters of Recommendation for Male and Female Chemistry and Biochemistry Job Applicants. *Sex Roles*, 57(7-8), pp. 509-514. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9291-4>; <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-007-9291-4>
- 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://doi.org/10.1177/0957926503014002277>
- Dutt, K. et al. (2016). Gender differences in recommendation letters for postdoctoral fellowships in geoscience. *Nature Geoscience* 9, 805–808. <https://www.nature.com/articles/ngeo2819>

## Identifying bias in a letter of reference

Consider whether the following are present in the letter. They may signal the presence of bias. Be aware that you cannot always tell if bias is present.

- Is the person referred to by their first name?
- Are there any references to the person’s personal status (e.g., as a parent, partner, volunteer)?
  - Very occasionally, such references may be relevant, but usually not. Consider if this is presented in relation to their qualifications or as a tribute to excellence; or instead as something they need to “balance” and manage—with difficulty—on the path to success. Also consider whether it is the main emphasis of the letter (problematic) versus an aside that is intended to highlight the exceptional nature of their accomplishments
- Are there references to the candidate’s actions or history in contexts outside of academia?
  - E.g., personal hobbies, family commitments, how much they had to learn to succeed
- Are teaching or other areas of ability (e.g., interpersonal skills) emphasized over research?
- Are hedges used frequently (e.g., nearly, fairly, etc.)? Versus outright declarations of excellence?
- Is the candidate described as depending on others for success? Versus achieving success through their intelligence and ability?
- Is the emphasis on hard work and diligence? Versus ability, insight, innate excellence or related attributes?
- If the gender or ethnicity of the candidate were changed, would the letter feel appropriate or problematic?

### What to do if bias seems to be present in the letter:

- If there are obvious signs of bias, use the letter with caution, or reduce its significance in the evaluation. Ensure that you balance its claims against evidence in other materials as well as follow up with the referee to see if you can gain more clarity on the reference details.
- Follow up with phone or email reference checks based on criteria so that details can be confirmed and concrete evaluations by the referee can be confirmed or identified as less reliable.
- Even if there are no strong signals of bias, be aware that all the application materials come from particular points of view and have some element of bias. Review each item with care; put more weight on more reliable materials; and balance out evidence from various stages of the application in making a final assessment.
- There may be times when requesting additional references may be appropriate.