
UMASS MATH & STATS - ANTIRACIST COMMITTEE - TIPS FOR RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

We often have to write recommendation letters for graduate school, jobs, student programs etc. Below are some tips for avoiding gender and racial bias in such letters.

- **Check your bias(es) before and while writing.** We all have some unconscious biases, and by actively acknowledging these biases, we can help to mitigate their effects on our language and behavior.
- **Avoid referencing stereotypes.** This may sound obvious, but it is unfortunately common for letters about minority candidates to mention a gender or racial stereotype. This isn't appropriate in a reference letter, even if it is done in a "positive" way. Here are some especially common stereotypes in letters to avoid:
 - That someone of a particular gender/ethnicity is (or is not!) *"quiet"*;
 - That a racial minority or of a particular background is *"better than you would expect for someone with their background"*;
 - That an international student *"speaks better English than you would think"*.
- **Avoid qualifiers,** such as *"For someone with young children..."*, *"For a non-native English speaker"*, or *"For a first-generation student..."*. The same point can almost always be made without the qualifier.
- **If you compare, compare broadly.** Sometimes letters of recommendation include comparisons, and those in letters for gender and racial minorities should be compared to a representative group of similarly qualified students rather than those that share the identity of the candidate.
- **Emphasize qualifications and achievements rather than personal qualities.** Reference letters and recommendations for gender and racial minorities are less likely to highlight research and other accomplishments and are more likely to focus on personal qualities than those for non-minorities.
- **Make sure you write enough.** Letters for gender and racial minorities are often shorter, which can signal less support for the candidate. An easy way to prevent this is to take a minute to review other letters you have written in the past to ensure that your letters for gender and racial minorities are comparable in length.
- **Keep it professional.** Letters for gender minorities are more likely to include personal information that could be irrelevant to the position. Also consider using formal titles and surnames for any gender.
- **Ask recommendees if you can highlight their diversity** in your letter. In some cases, you might want to highlight the student's diversity or background as a strength or asset. This can make sense in some contexts, but it is best to ask the student whether they are comfortable with this before doing so.
- **Ask recommendees what pronouns** to use to refer to them in the letters.
- **Be aware of the adjectives you use.** Some adjectives are used more often for gender and racial minority candidates, including "caring", "compassionate", "interpersonal", "warm", "helpful", "hard-working", "conscientious" and "diligent". While these adjectives might seem like compliments, they are less effective for recommendations than the adjectives more frequently used for non-minority candidates, such as "successful", "accomplished", "skilled", "knowledgeable", "insightful", "resourceful", "confident", "ambitious", and "independent".

Sources

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