

Visiting Scholar Program – Research Writing

Writing effective letters of recommendation: Ways to help candidates dazzle

As a researcher, you receive frequent requests for letters of recommendation from candidates for scholarships and fellowships. [Your letter is critical to their success.](#)

Here are tips on making your letters of recommendation strong, effective and equitable.

To do:

- 1) Write letters **only** for candidates you know well and can recommend enthusiastically. A vague or lukewarm letter will not help them and may actively damage their success.
- 2) Review the candidate's complete application before writing your letter. This can guide your choices on **types of information to highlight** for this specific competition and this candidate, such as impact of this fellowship on the candidate's planned career trajectory.
- 3) Compare the candidate to people at similar or more advanced career stages. A **comparison that is quantified or includes a statistic** has greatest impact, such as "most original thinker of all my 25 trainees over my 15 years as a supervisor" or "top 5% of students I've worked with."
- 4) Assess two or three outstanding qualities of the candidate, credibly positioning them as **uniquely qualified** for this award.
- 5) Evaluate, in some detail, specific research accomplishments by the candidate that are **exceptional for their career stage**. Include anecdotes and rich, convincing detail. Explain why the work is significant and how the candidate contributed.
- 6) Write a letter between one and two pages long, to include an appropriate level of detail.

To avoid:

- 1) Avoid generic, **non-specific praise**. Always include specific examples of candidate strengths that relate directly to the requirements for the competition.
- 2) Avoid highlighting skills or accomplishments that are expected of any candidate in the role that you know them, such as completing work assigned or standard responsibilities.
- 3) Avoid **gender or racial bias**. Studies* of recommendation letters for candidates from underrepresented groups reveal common traps that are easy to avoid with a little extra care.
 - Specify research and publications for every candidate you are recommending.
 - Avoid mentioning personal life, which is usually irrelevant to a competition.
 - Use titles and last names for candidates, not first names.
 - Avoid naming traits that raise stereotypes. Name traits such as *excellent, outstanding, insightful, resourceful, independent or knowledgeable*. Avoid naming traits such as *dependable, hard-working, dedicated, helpful or conscientious*.
 - Emphasize accomplishments and ability, not effort and personality.



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Resources

Try an [online calculator for gender bias](#)

Samples of strong and weak letters of recommendation:

[For a research fellowship](#)

[For a medical resident](#)

If you want to dig deeper into some of these topics, check this free handbook on [“Writing Recommendation Letters Online”](#).

* Some studies on gender and racial bias in letters of recommendation:

Turrentine FE, Dreisbach CN, St Ivany AR, Hanks JB, Schroen AT. Influence of Gender on Surgical Residency Applicants' Recommendation Letters. J Am Coll Surg. 2019;228(4):356-365.e3. doi:10.1016/j.jamcollsurg.2018.12.020

Grimm LJ, Redmond RA, Campbell JC, Rosette AS. Gender and Racial Bias in Radiology Residency Letters of Recommendation. J Am Coll Radiol. 2020;17(1 Pt A):64-71. doi:10.1016/j.jacr.2019.08.008

Filippou P, Mahajan S, Deal A, et al. The Presence of Gender Bias in Letters of Recommendations Written for Urology Residency Applicants. Urology. 2019;134:56-61. doi:10.1016/j.urology.2019.05.065

