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.
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:

