

# Writing Persuasive Letters of Recommendation

Teresa Mangum, Obermann Center for Advanced Studies 2019



# Ethical Obligations of Writers

- How well do you know the person you're recommending?
- Do you have time to write a strong letter?
- Are you recommending several people for the same position?
- Can you get the letter in on time?
- In this day and time—are you willing to tailor letters to specific positions?

# When Should You Just Say No?

- You don't know the person well
- You have a conflict of interests
- You have reservations about the person or their abilities
- Others are better positioned to write more effectively
- You simply don't have or can't make time to write a strong letter

# Ethical (and other) Obligations of Candidates

- Ask WELL in advance (a month or two in advance)
- Clarify why you're asking
- Provide *All the Things*—
  - DEADLINES
  - Job ad
  - Submission address and details
  - Copies of ad, CV, your letter, teaching philosophy, syllabi, research overview, plans for future projects, chapter, classes with person, titles and summary of papers/projects for classes
  - Offer to meet
  - Great UI Graduate College prep sheet <http://bit.ly/UIGradRec>
- Keep records of all your requests, status
- Gently nudge

# Goals—To Be Achieved

- Write a 2-page single-spaced letter (academic—otherwise 1-page)
- Register you know candidate well
- Make precise connections detailing candidate's strengths and unique fit with required and desired criteria in ad
- Show how candidate will contribute to X; how X will benefit candidate
- Clarify you view candidate as an impressive professional (vs friend)
- Provide specific, concrete, visceral evidence of strengths
- Write an evaluation, NOT summary

# Goals—To Be Avoided

- Vague letter that could be describing anyone
- Empty letter—gushing language, oozing adverbs
- Self-promotion
- Damnation with faint praise
- Condescension—always a student, never a colleague
- Inappropriate personal details
- “Coded” language— “lovely young woman,” “well-spoken” student of color

# Know Yourself as a (Letter) Writer

- Imagine YOUR audience—Who will be reading the letter? In what context? With what hopes, fears, expectations, and biases?
- Consider your writing style—you're a colleague and professional but not a robot
- Remember the power of efficient stories—showing vs telling
- Use action verbs rather than leaning on adjectives and adverbs
- Reflect on your relationship and your own power—
  - Is the candidate “Mary” or Professor Smith?
  - Are you avuncular? Collegial? Professional?

# Preparations

- Meet with applicant to review materials and discuss strengths, weaknesses, and strategy
- Ask for CV, application letter, and a list of candidate's self-assessment of strengths or changes since you last wrote
- Read the job description
- Identify key skills, training, characteristics



## Know the Genre

- **PARAGRAPH 1**
- Who am I to this person?
- How have we worked together?
- How long have we known each other?
- How am I qualified to judge without bias?
- Who is this person—student? Colleague? Discipline? Workplace?

## Know the Genre

- **PARAGRAPH 2-3**

- Offer most relevant experiences re job ad
- Explain research, work experience
- Describe topic
- Situate in field
- Elaborate on scope, importance
- Trumpet uniqueness
- Connect with employer/foundation

## Know the Genre

- **PARAGRAPH 3-4**
- Definition of success
- Clear evidence of success
  - Grants
  - Awards
  - Publications or other accomplishments
  - Exciting projects
  - Future plans
  - Special talents or skills

## Know the Genre

- **PARAGRAPH 4-5**
- Teaching (for academic positions)
- Emphasize breadth & flexibility
- Identify teaching “philosophy”
- Offer concrete examples—ideally that you’ve observed
- Note awards or other evidence of success

## Know the Genre

- **LAST PARAGRAPH**
- Sum up strengths
- Emphasize value as colleague

# Special Circumstances

- **Phone calls**
  - Do NOT be lured into informality
  - Speak as though the call is being recorded and publicized
- **Writing letters for two applicants** to same position/award/etc.
  - Treat each as unique
  - Make no cross-references between the two
  - Avoid using the same language in both (hello Power Thesaurus)

# Special Circumstances— “Character References”

- Fellowships often require comments on SPECIFIC topics-
  - Use paragraph shifts, bold face type, bullets, etc. to respond
- Fellowships also ask for evidence of particular qualities—
  - Fulbright: “emotional stability, maturity, motivation & seriousness of purpose”
  - Marshall: “distinction of intellect and character”
  - Rhodes: “integrity character, and demonstrated interest in and respect for their fellow beings” and “ability to lead”
  - Truman: “leadership abilities and potential, student’s leadership abilities and potential, student’s commitment to a career in public service”

# Gender (and Other[ing]) Troubles

- Length matters
- “Grindstone” adjectives vs talent/ability adjectives (Trix and Psenka, 2003)
  - Tireless, committed vs genius, analytical, rigorous
- “Standout” adjectives (Schmader, Whitehead, Wysocki, 2007)
  - Superb, wonderful, magnificent
- Communal vs “agentic” adjectives (Madera, Hebl, Martin, 2009)
  - Agreeable, sensitive, helpful vs directive, competent, independent
- Positive stereotypes
  - Women are creative and verbal/men are analytical and quantitatively skilled
  - (Cejka, Eagly, 1999)



# Gender, Race, and the Power of Implicit Bias 1

- Knowledge of stereotypes does not eliminate bias (Devine, Elliot, 1995)
- Gender of letter writer has unexpected impact
  - Women more likely to use “grindstone” adjectives
  - Men use more superlatives
- Candidates from underrepresented groups
  - 10% decrease in “achievement-related words” and 11% increase in “communal” adjectives
- Power of intersectionality
  - Gender + race = slight decrease in achievement words for male candidates

# Gender, Race, and the Power of Implicit Bias 2

- Good news—letters of rec for men/women and majority/minority groups more similar than different
- However—work to be done
  - Length of letters (men’s letters for men are longer) than letters for women
  - Longer letters often include stronger favorable language
  - Variation in grindstone versus ability words (work ethic vs talent and ability)
  - Emphasis on ability over work ethic for members of underrepresented groups
  - Effusive praise unsubstantiated by concrete examples helped no one

Patrick Akos and Jennifer Kretchmar. “Gender and Ethnic Bias in Letters of Recommendation.” *ASCA: Professional School Counseling*. 20.1 (2016-2017): 1-13 (online).

# Gender, Race, and the Power of Implicit Bias 3

- Naming
  - Consider when it's appropriate to use first names versus last names—probably good to err on the side of formality
  - Respect the candidate's preference re use of pronouns and note that equity trumps grammatical correctness so that using a plural pronoun (they, them) can work fine in any case

# Advice from the UI Graduate College

(with thanks to Brady Krien)

Powerful words include—

- **Standouts:** excellent, superb, outstanding, unique, exceptional, remarkable
- **Ability:** talent, intelligence, bright, flair, knack, expert, adept, adroit, creative
- **Grindstone:** hardworking, conscientious, diligent, reliable, methodical, persist
- **Teaching:** train, mentor, advise, rapport, instruct, colleague, citizen, engage
- **Research:** scholarship, result, finding, publish, method, discover, contribute

# What About Negative Comments?

- Relative progress
- Disadvantaged background
- Explicitly negative
- Re-mediative
- Inconspicuously ambiguous
- Hedges, odd asides, irrelevant comments
- Omissions and gaps
- “As far as I can tell...” or “I assume...”
- “If I can provide any additional information...”

*Joe Schall, e-Education Institute, Penn State College of Earth and Mineral Sciences, “Writing Recommendation Letters Online: A Handbook for Faculty.” <https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline/>*

“... it is notable that recommenders used significantly more standout adjectives to describe male candidates as compared to female candidates, even though objective criteria showed no gender differences in qualifications”

Examples: *most* gifted, *best* qualified

Additional findings from Toni Schmader, Jessica Whitehead, Vicki H. Wyszoci. “A Linguistic Comparison of Letters of Recommendation for Male and Female Chemistry and Biochemistry Job Applicants.” *Sex Roles* 57.7-8 (October 2007): 509-514.

# Outside Academe

- Letters are FAR shorter—almost never more than a page
- One goal is simply to VERIFY employment details and qualifications
  - When did person work with you?
  - Job duties?
- Expectation that you'll comment on performance AND subjective issues like character, “attitude,” ability to work well with others, etc.
- Strengths and skills
- Willingness to work with this person again
- Do NOT assume privacy and DO clarify your own career, working relationship

# Don't Overlook the Obvious

- Include your name and contact info
- Clarify who you are and what your relationship to the candidate is
- Make clear you have actually read the ad
- Use letterhead
- Send e-letters as PDFs
- Indicate that you yourself would love to work with this person again
- Assume your letter could appear on the front page of the NYT



# Final, Crucial Steps—PROOFREAD, PEOPLE

- Is letter addressed to correct person & institution?
- Are all references to earlier letters/purposes corrected?
- Update earlier letters (date of graduation, publication, etc.)?
- Include recent details to indicate you're still in touch
- Get the letter in a week in advance and inform the candidate
- *Send a little good luck note—applying for jobs is hard work*

Thanks to Brady Krien and Diane Finnerty for suggestions  
[TERESA-MANGUM@UIOWA.EDU](mailto:TERESA-MANGUM@UIOWA.EDU)

The

