EXAMPLES OF BIASES IN LETTERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Based on the work of


Length of Letters and Level of Assurance

- Recommendation letters for women are often shorter for women than for men.
- Shorter letters are often associated with minimum assurance.
- To achieve full or maximum assurance, a letter of recommendation must include:
  1. commitment and relationship of recommender with the applicant
  2. specificity of focus and record of applicant
  3. evaluation or comparison of traits and accomplishments

Anything less is considered minimal assurance

SAMPLE LETTER

Dear Dr Alfred Koop:
It gives me great pleasure in writing this recommendation letter for Dr Sarah Gray. I have known Sarah as a resident and as staff at The Metropolitan Hospital. She is knowledgeable, pleasant, and easy to get along with. I have no hesitation in recommending her for a faculty position at Centvingcing. I will be happy to answer any further questions in this regard.
Charles Lewis, MD, Chairman, Department of Psychiatry

This letter shows commitment and relationship to applicant but that’s all, making it a letter of minimal assurance.

FINDINGS: 15% for women’s and 6% for men’s letters

Use of Gender in the Letter

- Dr Gray is a thorough, hardworking, extremely intelligent and insightful woman.
- On a personal level Sarah is, in my opinion, the quintessence of the contemporary lady physician who very ably combines dedication, intelligence, idealism, compassion and responsibility without compromise.
- I believe Dr Harvey to be a man of great personal integrity.
- He is entirely dedicated to patient care, personable, a gentleman in every sense of the word.

FINDINGS: 10% for women and 5% for men’s letters

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**Doubt Raisers**

- **Negative Language**
  
  *While* Sarah has not done a lot of this type of research . . .  
  *Although* his publications are not numerous...

- **Hedges**
  
  *It appears* her health and personal life are stable.  
  *He appears* to be a highly motivated colleague.

- **Potential Negative**
  
  An independent worker, she *requires only a minimum of supervision.*  
  Bright, enthusiastic, he *responds well to feedback.*

**FINDINGS:** 24% of women and 12% of men’s letters had at least one doubt raiser

**Stereotypical Language**

- Dr (William) Smith has been very *successful* in obtaining grants from both the NIH (National Institute of Health) and industry and has developed an excellent clinical trials group for the study and treatment of AIDS.

- His substantial record of publication in reputable journals, during those developing years, certainly attests to his overall research capabilities and *accomplishments.*

- Dr (Sarah) Simpson is a caring, *compassionate* physician who has excellent interpersonal relationships with patients and their families as well as nursing and medical staff.

**FINDINGS:** 16% of women and 4% of men’s letters had at least one of these

**Grindstone Language**

- She is an extremely *conscientious* and *meticulous* researcher who devotes her time to laboratory work and the training of graduate students in laboratory technique.

- She is a superb experimentalist – very well organized, *thorough* and *careful* in her approach to research.

- I have found William to be *hard-working, thorough, and conscientious* in providing all aspects of patient care.

**FINDINGS:** 34% letters for women and 23% for men had grindstone language