The Letter of Recommendation - From the Requestor to the Reference
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Purpose
Learning a systematic approach to asking for a letter of recommendation as a requestor and for developing a letter of recommendation as a reference while being cognizant of potential biases is key to creating an effective letter of recommendation.

Introduction
Letters of recommendations (LOR) are a vital part of the medical student and residency application process, but who trains students in the etiquette of asking and what to provide to their references? In turn, who trains the references on how to construct a strong LOR? There are no “official” guides for either of these important processes.

Coaching students to:
- inform references as early as possible
- build professional rapport
- request the LOR in person

Providing the reference with:
- CV
- information on the program
- specific accomplishments that highlights why the student is competitive for the placement
- offering to draft the letter for further discussions with the requestor

For the reference:
- beginning with one’s role and relationship
- assessment of the student compared to others
- extrapolation of PARs-Problem, Action, Result

Once drafted:
- LOR must be analyzed for terms of unconscious bias
- Gender bias calculators and templates allow writers to maintain a focused, streamlined approach when writing LOR

Unconscious Gender Bias Statistics
1. Letters for men are 16% longer than letters for women
2. Letter for women are 2.5x as likely to make a minimal assurance (‘she can do the job’) rather than a strong endorsement (‘she is the best for the job’)

For the Requestor

For the Reference

Unconscious Gender Bias Statistics
3. Letters for women are 7x more likely to mention personal life; almost always irrelevant for the application
4. Letters for men are more likely to emphasize accomplishments while for women 50% are more likely to include adjectives of effort (hard-working) rather than ability
5. Letters for men are 4x more likely to mention publications and twice as likely to have multiple references to research

HOW TO BEGIN LETTER: Discuss your role, relationship with requestor and whether he/she waived their right to see the letter

WHAT TO INCLUDE IN LETTER: Your assessment of the student compared to others; lead with most compelling information up front

Use concrete examples (PARs-ProBLEM, Action, Result) to show proactive solutions requestor instigated or led; try to be specific and as intentional as possible focusing on three strengths/accomplishments

For the Reference

Adjectives to Avoid
1. Caring
2. Compassionate
3. Hard-working
4. Conscientious
5. Dependent
6. Diligent
7. Dedicated
8. Tacitful
9. Interpersonal
10. Warm
11. Helpful

Adjectives to Include
1. Successful
2. Excellent
3. Accomplished
4. Outstanding
5. Skilled
6. Insightful
7. Resourceful
8. Confident
9. Ambitious
10. Independent
11. Intellectual

How to Write a Recommendation Letter
- Include a strong opening sentence
- Provide specific examples of the student’s strengths
- Summarize the student’s overall strengths

Tactics to Mitigate Bias
1. Focus on concrete accomplishments and data supporting such
2. Ask someone to read your letter looking for gendered language
3. Gender bias calculators can paste letter into calculator and words that are more often associated with woman will be added to the female list and those more often associated with men will be added to the male list
4. Requestor drafting a letter to facilitate discussions with or for the reference to facilitate discussions associated with a strong, unbiased letter

Follow-Up
Thank your letter writer with a handwritten note or email. Let them know what happened with the decision, even if it is not a positive outcome. This is an opportunity to further seek professional guidance and/or let the reference know their contribution towards you achieving your goals.

References
8. https://doi.org/10.15154/me2020.00037.1

Figure 1: Out of 300 LOR written for research and clinical faculty positions at a medical school, researchers found letters describing the positive qualities of men more often emphasized their role as researchers and professionals, while letters describing the positive qualities of women more often emphasized teaching.