

(thoughts on)

# Recommendation Letters

**how to get awesome letters**

**who/when/how should you ask?**

# BAD LETTER

Dear Selection Committee,

I am writing to recommend Mr. Smith for your program. I know Mr. Smith in the capacity that he worked in my group over the summer. Mr. Smith was assigned a project upon his arrival. He was in the lab the amount of time required by the program that was funding him. He was diligent in his work, and he completed all assignments. I met with him regularly to detail the work that needed to be completed. Mr. Smith is a personable young man, and it was a pleasure to have him in the lab. In summary, I recommend Mr. Smith for your program.

Sincerely,  
Jane Doe, Ph.D. Assistant Professor

# GOOD LETTER

Dear Selection Committee,

I am writing this letter to strongly recommend Mr. Smith for your program. I know Mr. Smith because he worked in my lab for one summer. Mr. Smith came to me a year ago to discuss the possibility of spending a summer working in my lab. I met with him and outlined a project. I gave him some background reading at our first meeting. By the time of our second meeting he had read what I had given him and prepared a two-page project description. This level of effort is typical of a good medical student who joins my lab, so I agreed to take him on for a summer.

During his time in my lab, Mr. Smith demonstrated a good work ethic and interpersonal skills. We outlined a scope of work to be completed, and he successfully completed that work in the time required. He put in extra hours as necessary in order to meet specific deadlines that I set. I teamed him up with another student to work on the project. He seemed to work well with the other student, and I found him very personable. Mr. Smith put in sufficient work to be a co-author on a manuscript. Overall, I would strongly recommend Mr. Smith for a position in your program.

Sincerely,

Jane Doe, Ph.D. Assistant Professor

# AWESOME LETTER

Dear Selection Committee,

I am writing this letter to give my highest possible recommendation for Mr. Smith. I know Mr. Smith through his work in my laboratory. Mr. Smith first approached me two years ago about the possibility of work in my laboratory for a summer. At our first meeting I described the general outline of the project the he might work on. He asked good questions and appeared intelligent. He then went to the library and found many papers on the subject and read them carefully. He did this independently - I did not ask him to do this. I learned that he had done this at our second meeting, and I was quite impressed at his motivation and independence. Mr. Smith obtained funding from a program at our University to work in the lab for a summer.

During that summer, Mr. Smith demonstrated the ability to work independently with great creativity and enthusiasm. He also put in many long hours. He worked as hard as my best graduate student. I teamed Mr. Smith with another student to work on a project involving testing of patients having shoulder pathology. The project included recruiting patients, testing patients using biomechanical instrumentation, and data analysis. Mr. Smith excelled in each one of these areas. His interpersonal skills were excellent. He “schmoozed” the clinical staff to facilitate recruitment of patients. He tested the patients professionally. Sometimes this testing required long days due to the extensive setup and calibration of equipment each morning before the clinic began operation. He stayed after the testing sessions to back up data, clean up the area, and start data processing programs to run overnight. He was usually the first one in the lab in the morning and the last to leave in the evening.

The other student working with Mr. Smith commented favorably about working with Mr. Smith. He said the Mr. Smith got along well with everyone, pulled his own weight on the project, and had the ability to compromise with other team members. One incident illustrates this point. There is a staff member in an adjoining lab that is a rather prickly person who has had many problems with students in the past. Mr. Smith had to interact with this staff person in order to get his project done. Mr. Smith was able to find a common interest with this staff person, which was folk dancing, and build a rapport based on this mutual interest. At the end of the summer the staff person noted what a pleasure it was to work with Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith also volunteered to help others in the lab. One of the other students was doing a project on knee biomechanics, and it required harvesting knees from the University’s morgue. Mr. Smith volunteered to help harvest the knees on several occasions. I asked the graduate student in charge of that project about Mr. Smith, and he commented that Mr. Smith has excellent dissection skills.

I was especially taken by Mr. Smith’s creative mind and independent work ethic. He continued to read the literature independently and generate interesting hypotheses. We met about every other week, and at several meetings he presented papers and information that was new to me. By the end of the summer he was introducing me to scientific papers that were directly relevant to his study that I hadn’t seen before. Mr. Smith also showed remarkable problem solving ability. Our instrumentation system began having problems midway through his experiment. Mr. Smith spent a full weekend troubleshooting the system. He discovered there was a loose wire in the A/D connection box.

Mr. Smith is going to be first author on a manuscript that he is preparing for publication. He followed through on his promise to write the manuscript during his M2 year. Moreover, he handled the manuscript revisions and saw the manuscript through to publication. This illustrates his high level of motivation.

In summary, Mr. Smith is clearly the best student I have worked with in the last 10 years. I would very much like him match to our residency program. Even though I hope he stays here, I think he would be an outstanding asset to your program. I give him my highest recommendation.

Sincerely,  
Jane Doe, Ph.D. Assistant Professor

**how do you get awesome letters?**

**letter writers need you to give them an excuse to make your letter phenomenal. they should think of you and immediately have these things come to mind:**

hard work, independence,  
creativity, efficient,  
humble, mature,  
scientific curiosity,  
problem solving ability,  
ability to get along with people

**make their job easy by exemplifying these characteristics in your interactions every day.**

**who/when/how should you ask?**



**three letters needed for postdoc applications  
(sometimes, but rarely, four)**

- \* PhD supervisor**

- \* secondary supervisor**

- \* third letter - external  
collaborator**

**Research position = All research letters**

**Teaching position = Some research, some teaching**

**cultivate your letter  
writers as soon as  
possible: if it's time to  
ask for a letter and you  
don't know who to ask,  
that's BAD.**

**give a \*minimum\* of 2 weeks to  
letter writers. Preferably lots of  
warning — if you're applying to  
jobs this year, warn letter writers  
at the beginning of the season  
(August!)**

**Clear statements of support are surprisingly rare. Who has had successful students in the past?**

**What about extenuating circumstances?  
Is it OK to have a conversation with my  
letter writer about it?**

# Avoiding gender bias in reference writing

Got a great student? Planning to write a super letter of reference?  
Don't fall into these common traps based on unconscious gender bias.

## Mention research & publications

Letters of reference for men are 4x more likely to mention publications and twice as likely to have multiple references to research. Make sure you put these critical accomplishments in every letter!

## Don't stop now!

On average, letters for men are 16% longer than letters for women and letters for women are 2.5x as likely to make a minimal assurance ('she can do the job') rather than a ringing endorsement ('she is the best for the job').

## Emphasize accomplishments, not effort

Letters for reference for men are more likely to emphasize accomplishments ('his research', 'his skills', or 'his career') while letters for women are 50% more likely to include 'grind-stone' adjectives that describe effort. 'Hard-working' associates with effort, but not ability.

## We all share bias

It is important to remember that unconscious gender bias isn't a male problem. Research shows that women are just as susceptible to these common pitfalls as men. This is a problem for all of us - let's solve it together!

brought to you by:



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Commission on the  
Status of Women

Research from Trix, F & Psenka, C. Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty. Discourse & Society, 2003; and Madera, JM, Hebl, MR, & Martin, RC. Gender and letters of Recommendation for Academia: Agentive and Communal Differences. Journal of Applied Psychology, 2009.



THE UNIVERSITY  
OF ARIZONA

## Keep it professional

Letters of reference for women are 7x more likely to mention personal life - something that is almost always irrelevant for the application.

Also make sure you use formal titles and surnames for both men and women.

## Stay away from stereotypes

Although they describe positive traits, adjectives like 'caring', 'compassionate', and 'helpful' are used more frequently in letters for women and can evoke gender stereotypes which can hurt a candidate. And be careful not to invoke these stereotypes directly ('she is not emotional').

## Be careful raising doubt

We all want to write honest letters, but negative or irrelevant comments, such as 'challenging personality' or 'I have confidence that she will become better than average' are twice as common in letters for female applicants. Don't add doubt unless it is strictly necessary!

### Adjectives to avoid:    Adjectives to include:

caring  
compassionate  
hard-working  
conscientious  
dependable  
diligent  
dedicated  
tactful  
interpersonal  
warm  
helpful

successful  
excellent  
accomplished  
outstanding  
skilled  
knowledgeable  
insightful  
resourceful  
confident  
ambitious  
independent  
intellectual

Follow us at: [www.facebook.com/uacsw](http://www.facebook.com/uacsw)

For an electronic copy of this graphic, see:  
[www.csw.arizona.edu/LORbias](http://www.csw.arizona.edu/LORbias)

**When applying for more than 3 jobs  
organize deadline information and job  
description for your writers!**

Google Docs

+email reminders

# **Who should write recommendation letters?**

**if someone asks you for a letter, always stop and evaluate how your own letter is most helpful for that person: are you too junior, can you write a joint letter with someone more senior?**

**(postdocs, professors, research scientists)**