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!

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.

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’).

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’).

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 ‘grindstone’ adjectives that describe effort. ‘Hardworking’ associates with effort, but not ability.

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!

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!

Adjectives to avoid:
caring
compassionate
hard-working
conscientious
dependable
diligent
dedicated
tactful
interpersonal
warm
helpful

Adjectives to include:
successful
excellent
accomplished
outstanding
skilled
knowledgeable
insightful
resourceful
confident
ambitious
independent
intellectual

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