Tips for writing a good recommendation letter

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Bias exists in letters of recommendation, and it is reflected in the language used to describe and evaluate different candidates for countless opportunities in academia. Professional organizations are becoming more aware of this issue, and are pursuing avenues to address it. This paper discusses the type of information, that is, useful to have on hand when writing a recommendation letter, the structure of the letter, a process to follow for proof reading, when to say no, a compilation of additional resources, and tips for people asking for recommendation letters. Specifically, we discuss common grammar mistakes, the purpose of each portion of the letter, and ways conscious and unconscious bias can influence wording and structure. This paper is intended to provide a single place where people can go to learn all of the basics needed to write a strong recommendation letter, as currently available letter writing resources in the space physics community tend to focus on one aspect of letter writing.

KEYWORDS

recommendation letters, bias, equity, inclusion, space physics

1 Introduction

Bias is defined as a prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another usually in a way, that is, considered to be unfair. There are two different types of bias: conscious (or explicit) bias and unconscious (or implicit) bias. A recent report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2022) highlighted that structural racism, sexism, interpersonal attitudes, stereotypes, and bias all contribute to the a lack of opportunity for early and sustained research experiences for women and historically underrepresented groups in space physics. Further, a number of prior studies (e.g., Dutt et al., 2016; Houser and Lemmons, 2018; Madera et al., 2019; Rojek et al., 2019) have demonstrated such bias often appears in recommendation letters, especially those in STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine) fields. Since recommendation letters, letters of support, *etc.* are a near universal requirement for awards, promotions, scholarships, acceptance into graduate school, internships, and postdocs, *etc.* writing a strong recommendation letter, free of bias is critical to recruiting and retaining talented people in space physics, especially those from historically underrepresented and marginalized groups.

Writing a recommendation letter for a colleague or a student can be a daunting prospect. After all, the future of their career hinges on your words. How can you best describe their strengths and suitability for this position? This guide will help you write a letter that shines the best possible light on the person you are recommending, and limit instances of bias.

2 Before you start

Gather information about the recommendee[1]. You may need to ask the recommendee for an updated copy of their résumé or Curriculum Vitæ (CV). This will help you gather the important details you will need for the recommendation letter.

1) When did you work with this person?
2) How long have you known them?
3) What job position did they hold at the time of your interactions?
4) What qualities about this person made them good at their job at this time?

You should read the opportunity for which you are recommending them. What are the key qualities are they looking for in an applicant? This will help focus your recommendation letter by including examples that demonstrate the qualities that the employer (or award committee, *etc.*) desires. You may want to explicitly include some of the language from the opportunity in your reference letter to strengthen this connection.

Different opportunities also have different format requirements for recommendations. Recommendation letters are commonly one page long for early-career positions, but are frequently longer for senior positions, scholarships, or awards. Some institutions accept PDFs akin to traditional letters, while others use online forms with boxes asking the writer to answer a prompt. Still others prefer to ask questions over the phone. Knowing the recommendation format before you start will help you craft the best response for the opportunity in question.

3 Structure

In most situations, recommendation letters will follow a similar format: a greeting; an opening paragraph introducing the recommendee and yourself; 3–5 paragraphs providing detailed examples that demonstrate the recommendee's qualities; a final paragraph concisely recommending the recommendee for the desired position; and a closing statement followed by your signature.

3.1 Greeting

In formal English letter writing, the opening greeting follows the form "Dear Title Surname:". Like informal writing, "Dear" is used as an opening. Unlike informal letters, a colon is used to end the line instead of a comma.

If you know the name and title of the person you are writing to, it is best to include it. If you know the person's name but not their title, you may either omit it and use their full name or use the highest title associated with their position. If you are unsure of the correct pronouns and the highest appropriate title is gendered, consider omitting the title. Making incorrect assumptions about gender or marital status is a sure-fire way to put the evaluating reader in a bad mood.

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[1] Note for recomendees: If you have a web presence, make sure to keep it up to date with your CV information so it is easy for people to find.

If you do not know the name of the person you are writing to, using a term that refers to the position or group is acceptable; for example, "Dear Hiring Committee:". We recommend not using "Dear Sir or Madam:" as the person you are writing to may be non-binary, or prefer a different title such as Dr. or Prof.

3.2 Opening paragraph

First, state the recommendee's full name (with or without a title) and what award or position you are recommending them for. Describe how you know the applicant and briefly summarize why you are recommending them for this opportunity.

After the first sentence where the recommendee's full name is used, it is important to refer to them in a professional manner throughout the rest of the letter. Using their professional first name, full name, or title and surname are all acceptable. This should be the name they choose to use in professional circles (which may not necessarily be their legal name; for example, someone who publishes under their maiden name). Avoid using friendly nicknames, as many cultures consider this to be rude or vulgar in a formal setting. It can also introduce an unconscious bias against the recommendee, as nicknames commonly use diminutives that are associated with children, and this could lead to the recommendee appearing less qualified.

In some instances, it may be useful to establish your credentials as an authority in the field. This would most likely be necessary when writing a letter to someone outside your field (e.g., for a visa or citizenship application). When doing so, be as succinct as possible to avoid removing the focus from the recomendee.

3.3 Central paragraphs

Each paragraph should focus on a reason that the recommendee is suited to the opportunity (for instance, in a job application you might use a paragraph per item on the person specification). Make sure your details are specific and relevant to the opportunity. You should concentrate on measurable achievements instead of commenting on a person's general demeanor or appearance. For example, if you cite the quality of the recommendee's papers as evidence in our letter, you could quantify this by including details like the number of papers written (within the context of how many might be expected) or how impactful the papers were to the community. Pick strengths where you can enthusiastically recommend the candidate, that are relevant to the position for which you are recommending the candidate, and that you can support with detailed examples and evidence. Quantifiable comparisons (e.g., "in the top ten percent of all the students I have worked with") frequently draw the attention of evaluators, and so should be used when appropriate and fully supported. You should not include negative examples.

If the recommendee has a quality that you perceive as a potential reason to not hire them, either do not mention it (it is not something you are recommending) or do not write the recommendation letter. Remember that the role of the recommendation letter is to provide positive information about the recommendee. Anything you choose to not mention, that is, vital to the role will be interpreted as a negative without you needing to say anything.

3.4 Final paragraph

Restate why you are recommending this person for the opportunity and reemphasize the strength of your recommendation. This is the last thing the committee will see, and will likely stick in their mind. Again, do not comment on a person's general demeanor or appearance. Focus on measurable achievements that are relevant to the position or award.

3.5 Closing

These standards will vary by country and evolve over time, but the standard is to be polite and professional. At the time of publication, *Sincerely,* is commonly used in the United States, *Best regards,* is the standard in the United Kingdom, and *Very respectfully,* is standard in the military. Including your printed name with appropriate titles below your signature. However, this should not be a long block of awards or affiliations. It should not take up space that would be put to better use writing about the recommendee in the central portion of the letter.

4 Proofreading

Once the letter is written, it is essential to proofread the letter. Keep an eye out for spelling and grammatical errors, and ensure the letter strongly states why you are recommending this person for the opportunity. Here are some things to look for in your letter.

1) Spelling and grammatical errors: while minor, these errors can distract from the thrust of the letter and may weaken the recommendation.
2) Consistency in naming practices: make sure that the name of the recommendee is correct and the form of address you choose to use is applied consistently throughout the letter.
3) Pronoun check: Ensure that the correct pronouns are used consistently throughout the letter.
4) Number of compliments: expect to have 3-5 major reasons that you think this person is a good fit for the opportunity, and align these reasons with the person specification (or equivalent).
5) Detailed and substantive examples: make sure each compliment is supported by several sentences of substantiating information, ideally providing quantitative metrics that allow the recommendee to be compared favorably to other candidates.
6) Adjective check: consider using a thesaurus to find the most appropriate and positive adjectives to support your case, and using a gender-bias calculator (Forth, 2013; Lowe, 2015) to identify adjectives that may undermine your recommendation.
7) Formatting: make sure the letter is consistently formatted and easy to read.
8) Word count: some organizations place limits on the word count for recommendation letters, so check to make sure the letter will not undermine the candidate's application through non-compliance.
9) Outside eyes: strongly consider asking a colleague or a service (such as ELSP, Burrell et al., 2021) to review the letter, as an objective opinion will often notice weaknesses imparted through your habitual writing style.

The best way to spot mistakes is to proof read something you have not written, or have not written recently. Spotting typos, unclear wording, or unconscious bias is difficult to do for yourself. Thus, whenever possible, we highly recommend having a colleague or review service proofread for you. If you are proofreading for someone else, here is a checklist that can help you identify potential strengths and weaknesses in the letter.

1) Run the text through a gender bias calculator to obtain an initial percentage of male- and female-associated words.
2) Read through the letter, highlight things that jump out at you.
3) Fix typos and grammatical errors.
4) Determine the number of compliments to establish the positive aspects that are being imparted.
5) Figure out why you highlighted the different statements and say, generally, what would make them present the candidate in a better light.
6) Optionally, rewrite the letter using positive adjectives suggested by the context of the compliments.
7) Identify areas where more or different examples would be helpful.
8) Consider general formatting, such as the amount of white space or the word count.
9) If any re-writing was done, re-run the gender bias calculator to track improvement.

5 When to say no

If you are asked to write a recommendation letter, you are not required to say yes. In certain situations, you may do the recommendee a favour by saying no. Good reasons to turn someone down include.

1) Not being able to, in good conscience, recommend the person to the position for which they are applying.
2) Not having sufficient experience working with the recommendee.
3) Having already agreed to write a recommendation letter for another applicant to the same opportunity.
4) Simply signing a recommendation letter that the recommendee wrote themself.

Kindly turning a person down allows them to find someone who will provide them with a strong recommendation, improving their career prospects.

In some cases, communication between yourself and the potential recommendee may result in you agreeing to write a letter despite not being able to accurately present the recommendee as a strong candidate. It is vital to provide accurate information in your recommendation letter, but only appropriate to write such a letter if the person you are writing for is aware that this will not be a strong, positive recommendation. A common example of when this may occur is for an undergraduate transfer student. In this example, the student may not have close relationships with enough professors and consider one generic, positive letter out of several better for their application than not providing the requested number of recommendation letters. In cases where you are not writing a strong recommendation letter, be extra careful to ensure that you are accurately portraying the recommendee's abilities and are not negatively influenced by biases.

6 Resources for writing a strong nomination

The Equitable Letters for Space Physics (ELSP) group is providing a review service for recommendation and nomination letters (Burrell et al., 2021). This service functions similarly to the journal review process, and reviews letters for unconscious bias as well as factors like spelling and grammar. A review is expected to take about 2 weeks.

Additionally, there are many helpful resources available to guide you in writing a good nomination. Most university student unions or career centers provide in-person support, online grammar guides, and online recommendation letter examples. The ELSP website (Smith et al., 2021) also hosts links to resources from universities, journals, and professional services. This includes links to a gender bias calculator (Schmader et al., 2007; Lowe, 2015), a tool to identify inconsiderate writing (Wormer et al., 2017), and various websites on best practices for writing professional letters. The ELSP website also provides example of good and bad letters for different types of recommendation and nomination letters, showcasing different ways implicit bias can occur.

7 Tips for recommendees

To obtain a strong letter of recommendation, there are some "best practices" that you can use. Start by asking a potential recommender, "Do you think you could write me a *strong* recommendation?" If they say yes, then provide the recommender with as much information as possible regarding your achievements (for example, your résumé or CV and a list of accomplishments) and the opportunity you are applying for or want to be nominated for. This will allow the recommender to spend a higher percentage of their time writing a strong letter instead of researching the information in order to write the letter. Among others, the Institute for Broadening Participation: Building Partnerships to Support Diversity in STEMM (Kauer et al., 2018) and Gonzaga University (Brackmann, 2021) provide excellent articles/checklists on the best practices for requesting and obtaining a strong letter of recommendation. The most important of these best practices are summarized below:

1) Give recommenders plenty of lead time: 2–3 months in advance if possible.
2) Provide short descriptions for the jobs, scholarships, and awards that will request references on your behalf.
3) Prepare a packet for each recommender that highlights your strengths (for example, résumé/CV, classes taken, awards, community-building activities, work experience, mentoring experience). Make sure to include in this packet several reasons why you have asked the recommender to write this letter, including any additional information you hope they will discuss.
4) Make the logistics of submitting the letter as straightforward as possible. Provide a "hard" deadline, the name of the person receiving the letter (if possible), and instructions about how the recommender should submit the letter.
5) Follow up with each recommender to let them know their letters have been received. Thank them for supporting your career and let them know the outcome of your applications.

8 Summary

Recommendation letters play a critical role in the academic selection process, and offer a more personal and subjective view into a recomendee's "fit" for a position, program, *etc.* This article offers suggestions to improve the quality of recommendation letters coming from the space physics community (and the broader STEMM fields), including providing recommendations and resources to reduce instances of bias. Specifically, we encourage those writing recommendation letters to allow enough time for an independent review by a colleague(s) or review service. Similar to submitting a manuscript for publication in an academic journal, independent proofreading of recommendation letters will greatly improve the quality of your letter and reduce and or eliminate any conscious or unconscious bias.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

AB led the conceptualization and drafting of the this manuscript. All other authors contributed text to specific sections in the manuscript, as well as contributed citations, edited, revised, and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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