

# Writing Effective Letters of Support, Recommendation, and Promotion for Yourself and Others



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# Letters for Who and for What?

- Students/trainees applying for grad school, internships, jobs
- Tenure and promotion letters for people you know/don't know
- Research collaborators applying for grants
- Colleagues applying for jobs or awards

# Overview

- Letters of support
- Letters of recommendation
- Letters for promotion & tenure
- Special issues:
  - Inadvertent sex bias
  - Legal concerns

# Poll Question

- What is your current role?
  - A. CDA Awardee
  - B. CDA Alum
  - C. CDA Mentor
  - D. Other

# Poll Question

- Which of the following types of letters have you written, for yourself or for others?  
(Choose all that apply)
  - A. Letter of support for a research proposal
  - B. Letter of recommendation for a job or award
  - C. Letter for promotion/tenure

# Poll question

- Have you ever drafted or written a letter of support or recommendation for yourself?
  - A. Yes, I have a few times
  - B. Yes, I do frequently
  - C. Yes, I do it almost all the time
  - D. No



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# GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS



# Reasons to Draft Your Own

- Expectations
- Timeliness
- Facilitation
- Congruence



# Potential Challenges

- Avoiding similar word choice, phrases, style
- Avoiding similar content
- Negotiating edits



# Recommendations for Requestors

- Request carefully, request early
- Review successful samples
- Meet/speak with letter writer(s)
- Send relevant refresher materials
- Provide accurate addressee(s)
- Offer to draft
- Waive right to see (if applicable)
- Thank the writer
- Proofread final

# General Recommendations for Writers: Preparing to Write the Letter

- Meet/speak with the requestor
- Letter of reference vs. Letter of recommendation
- Decline if you can't prepare an appropriate or favorable letter
- Get a name
- Commit enough, but not too much, time

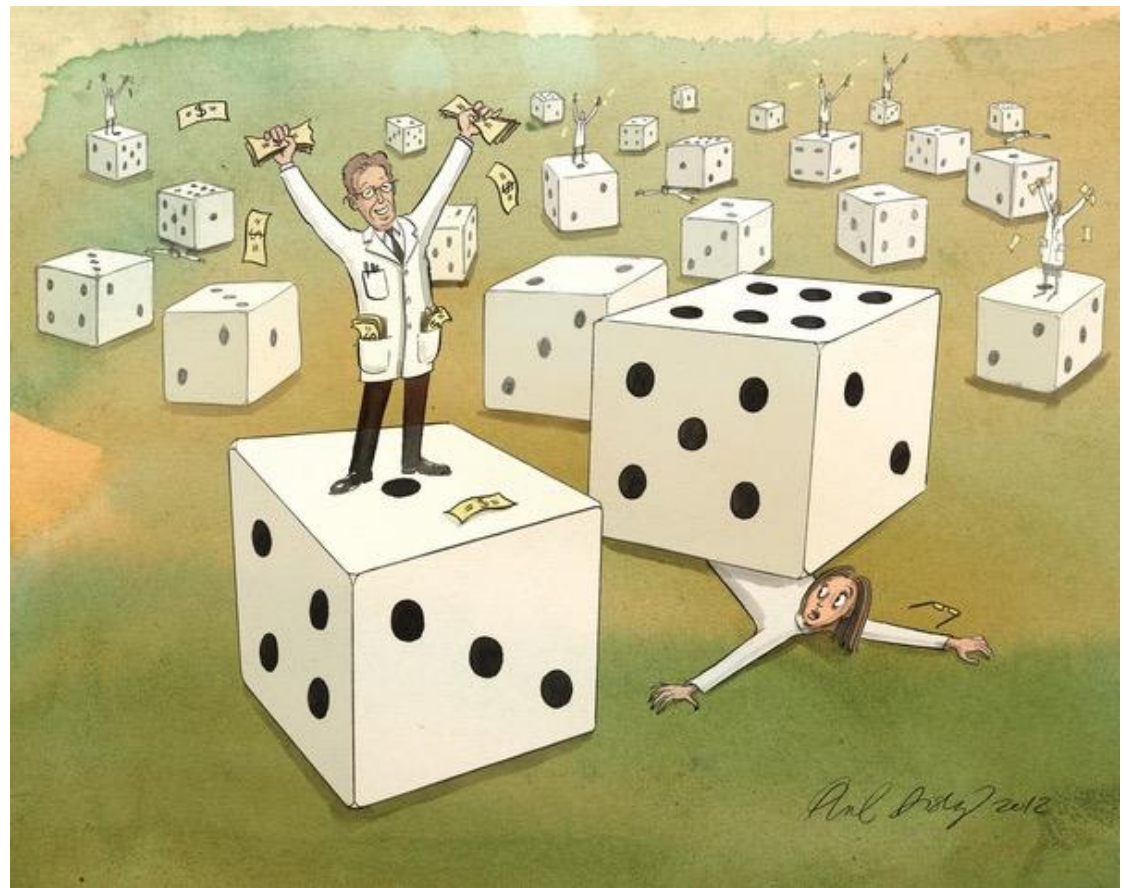
# General Recommendations for Writers: Writing the Letter

- Be short & clear, use formal format and tone
- Provide the information you'd want to know
- Discuss most relevant skills or characteristics
- Use specific, objective data and supplement with interpretations or explanations
- Tailor your letter; be specific
- Choose words carefully, be authentic
- Offer contact info for clarification, questions

# General Recommendations for Writers: Before Sending the Letter

- Critically read, and review language and info
- Ensure no typos (especially in names)
- Place on letterhead





# LETTER OF SUPPORT— RESEARCH PROPOSAL

# Letter of Support

- Purpose: To demonstrate that the planned collaboration is both appropriate and genuine
- Audience: Funder
- Goals:
  - Specify what the consultant(s)/collaborator(s) will contribute to the research
  - Convince the reviewer that the consultant(s)/collaborator(s) will fulfill the request
  - Convey enthusiasm for the work
  - Lend credibility to your proposal





## Letter of Support: Introductory Paragraph

- 1-3 sentences
- Statement of ENTHUSIASTIC support for the project/research
- Identification of the research project AND the applicant by name/title
- Writer's current title, professional role

# Examples

- “With great enthusiasm, I agree to serve as a Co-investigator on your research proposal titled XXXXXX.”
- “I am writing to express my fullest support for Dr. Scientist’s proposal entitled, XXXXXXXX. As a health services researcher and Associate Professor of Public Health at Big Name University, I agree to serve as a Co-Investigator on this study.”

## Letter of Support: Body

### 1-3 paragraphs or more

- Brief statement of study purpose, aims
- Alignment of the proposal with:
  - the writer's research or the RFP
  - larger questions, priorities or initiatives in the field
- Specific mention of how the proposal:
  - addresses a need or a gap
  - builds on or improves previous or current research
  - serves as a foundation for future research

## Letter of Support: Body

1-3 paragraphs or more

- SPECIFIC role(s) or contribution(s) of the collaborator in the study
- Why this collaborator is the appropriate person/organization/lab to perform the work

# Example

- “The proposed study is particularly timely given the new parameters for addiction treatment laid out in the Affordable Care Act, and will help answer ongoing questions in the field about the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of co-located, integrated substance use treatment in primary care settings.”

# Example

- “As a Co-Investigator on this study, I am prepared to make contributions in 2 key areas: 1) Provider and clinic recruitment, and 2) analysis of data from cluster randomized trials. In my own work on ABC, we have successfully recruited over 20 primary care clinics and 60 providers. Lessons learned from these experiences will directly inform recruitment strategies in Dr. Scientist’s proposed study. Additionally. . .”

# Letter of Support: Closing

- 1-3 sentences
- Reaffirmation of support/interest
- Reaffirmation of potential impact/significance
- Cordial closing

# Example

- “I look forward to continued collaboration with Dr. Scientist on this work.”
- “Best of luck with your grant application. I anxiously await the results of this study and its impact on our field.”



# Special Notes

- Sometimes addressed to PI, sometimes to funder; tailor appropriately
- Refer to applicant by first name or Dr. [Scientist]?



# **LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION**

# Letter of Recommendation

- Purpose: To provide an overall assessment of the candidate's potential to excel in a new position
- Audience: Committee members or administrators

# Typical Topics

- Experience and expertise
- Past job/task performance
- Accomplishments
- Intellectual ability
- Certain personality attributes
  - Leadership qualities
  - Team-building abilities
  - Perseverance
  - Communication skills

# Main Sections

- 1-2 pages
- Introduction and Background
- Specific Assessments
- Summary of Recommendation



# Letter of Recommendation: Introduction & Background

- Identify candidate & position applying for
- Describe your relationship with the candidate and length of time knowing
- State intention to provide favorable recommendation



# Letter of Recommendation: Specific Assessments

- Provide specific evidence for your recommendation
- Ask yourself, “How does the information I just wrote support my assertion that this person is a quality candidate?”
- Only speak to relevant personal traits, e.g., leadership, motivation, creativity, problem-solving ability, management, ability to collaborate or teach effectively

# Letter of Recommendation: Specific Assessments



- Avoid “doubt raisers”
  - Negative language: “While not the best postdoc I’ve had. . . .”
  - Faint praise: “She worked hard on projects she accepted.”
  - Hedges: “He *appears to be* highly motivated.”
- Avoid jargon, clichés, effusive language



## Letter of Recommendation: Summary

- Briefly summarize main points of letter
- State or restate your recommendation
- Invitation to contact writer for more info

## Letter of Recommendation: Special Circumstances

- Issues that delayed time-to-degree or affected productivity
  - Talk to applicant first about preferences
  - Generally better to address than avoid
  - Being vague sometimes worse than avoiding
  - Consider framing as evidence of resilience, ability to problem-solve, overcome adversity, etc.



"Behind one door is tenure - behind the other  
is flipping burgers at McDonald's."

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# LETTERS FOR PROMOTION & TENURE

# Letter for Promotion & Tenure

- Purpose: To provide an overall assessment of the candidate's potential to excel in a new (higher level) position
- Audience: Review committees and academic administrators



# P&T Letter

- Internal or external
- Needs to be specific to, and speak to:
  - Specific letter instructions/questions
  - Institution's requirements for P&T
  - Research, Teaching, Service
- 2-3 pages

# Introduction

- Warm, personalized opening
- Who writer is, how s(he) knows candidate, for how long, etc.
- Brief description of the candidate's discipline, topical/thematic focus

# Research

- Substantive, specific description of their work
- Context for that work for its larger scope, import, and promise in the field
- Evidence of wider success (grants, awards, publications, leadership roles)
- Brief description of next steps in research/scholarship



# Teaching

- Basics:
  - Course names
  - Methods
  - Observations, evaluations, feedback



# Teaching

- Effectiveness of course delivery
- Quality of course content
- Quality of course/curriculum development
- Effectiveness of advising or mentoring
- Effectiveness as thesis or dissertation committee member or chair
- Recognition of teaching
- Use of research or service to enhance teaching



# Service

- To the institution  
(university, college, department, program)
- To the profession
- To society  
(e.g., through consultation)
- Recognition of service
- Use of teaching or research to enhance service

# Rankings

**Standard model/general**: How does Dr. X compare with other individuals in his/her field at similar career stages?

**Standard model/more specific**: How does Dr. X compare in terms of research achievements, standing, and potential with other individuals in his/her field at similar career stages?

**Advanced model/domestic**: How does Dr. X compare with the best people in the US at similar stages in their careers?

**Advanced model/global**: How does Dr. X compare with the best people in the world at similar stages in their careers?

**Advanced model/comprehensive**: How does Dr. X compare with leaders in his/her field with respect to both current and potential future standing in the field, nationally and internationally?

# INADVERTENT BIAS



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*Exploring the color of glass: letters of  
recommendation for female and male  
medical faculty*

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*Discourse & Society*

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FRANCES TRIX AND CAROLYN PSENKA

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

# Minimal Assurance

RE: Sarah Gray, MD

I am writing in support of Sarah Gray MD's application for the position of Associate Professor of Nephrology in your department. I have worked closely with Dr Gray both as her chairman and as a fellow faculty member doing pediatric nephrology for the past three years. She is a superb clinician and academician. I truly enjoyed working with her. Your gain is my loss. I believe that you will find that she will be a genuine adjunct to your faculty. If you require more specific information, please do not hesitate to notify me.

Sincerely,  
Charles Lewis, MD  
Professor & Chairman, Depart. of Nephrology

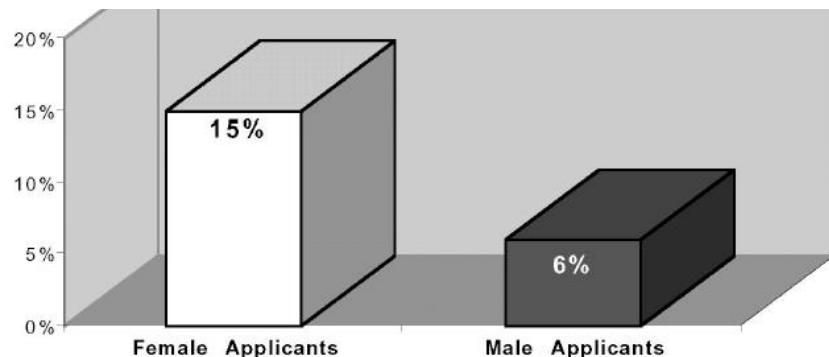


FIGURE 1. Percentage of letters of minimal assurance

# Use of Gender Terms

Dr Gray is a thorough, hardworking, extremely intelligent and insightful *woman*.

She is an extremely intelligent young *lady* with an admirable work ethic.

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.

Overall, we have found William a highly intelligent and hard working young *man*.

He is entirely dedicated to patient care, personable, a *gentleman* in every sense of the word.

# Stereotypic Adjectives

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



# “Doubt Raisers”



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## TEXT 6. EXAMPLES OF CATEGORIES OF DOUBT RAISERS

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### *negative language*

While Sarah has not done a lot of bench type research, She has a somewhat challenging personality.

Although his publications are not numerous as you know, While not the best student I have had,

### *hedges*

It appears that her health and personal life are stable.

He appears to be a highly motivated colleague,

### *potentially negative*

As an independent worker she requires only a minimum amount of supervision.

Bright, enthusiastic, he responds well to feedback.

### *unexplained*

Now that she has chosen to leave the laboratory.

### *faint praise*

She worked hard on projects that she accepted.

I have every confidence that Bill will become better than average. He is void of mood swings and temper tantrums.

### *irrelevancy*

She is quite close to my wife.

He is very active in church.

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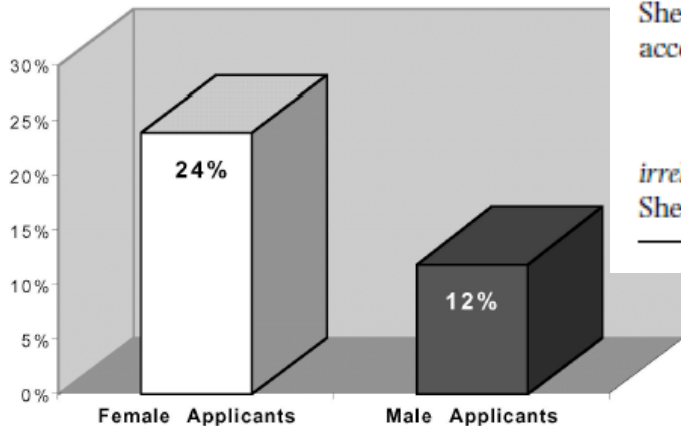


FIGURE 2. Percentage of letters with doubt raisers (*negative language, hedges, potentially negative, unexplained, faint praise, irrelevancies*)

# “Doubt Raisers”

## TEXT 9. FINAL PARAGRAPH OF *DOUBT RAISERS*

[eight paragraphs precede]

I strongly supported Sarah's application for an *Associate Professor appointment at Northsouthern University*, and feel that at the present time she is even more qualified for that level. *While she has not been able to accomplish a lot in academic pulmonary medicine during the past few years due to career changes and other personal issues*, she has continued to grow and mature, and am sure she would be an even stronger and more effective member of your department than she was in St. Louis. Her great gift for teaching, *especially in small groups and one on one*, is something that I know you will come to appreciate. I recommend her without reservation for this proposed appointment.

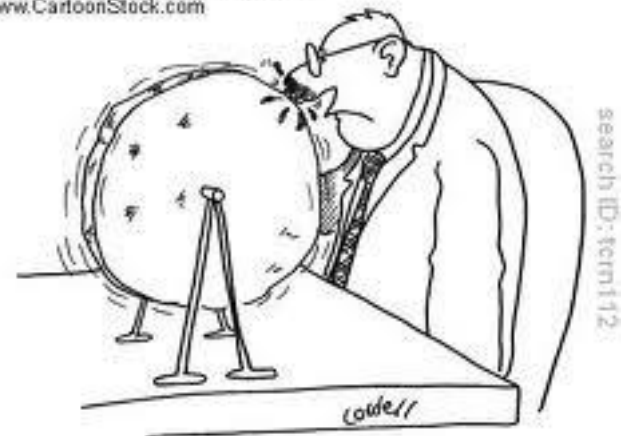
# “Grindstone Adjectives”

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.

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# Naming/Use of Titles

- 3% of female applicants' letters but 12% of male applicants' letters used titles such as “Chief Resident” or “Head of Pediatric Cardiology” instead of simply “Dr.”



# Possessive Semantics

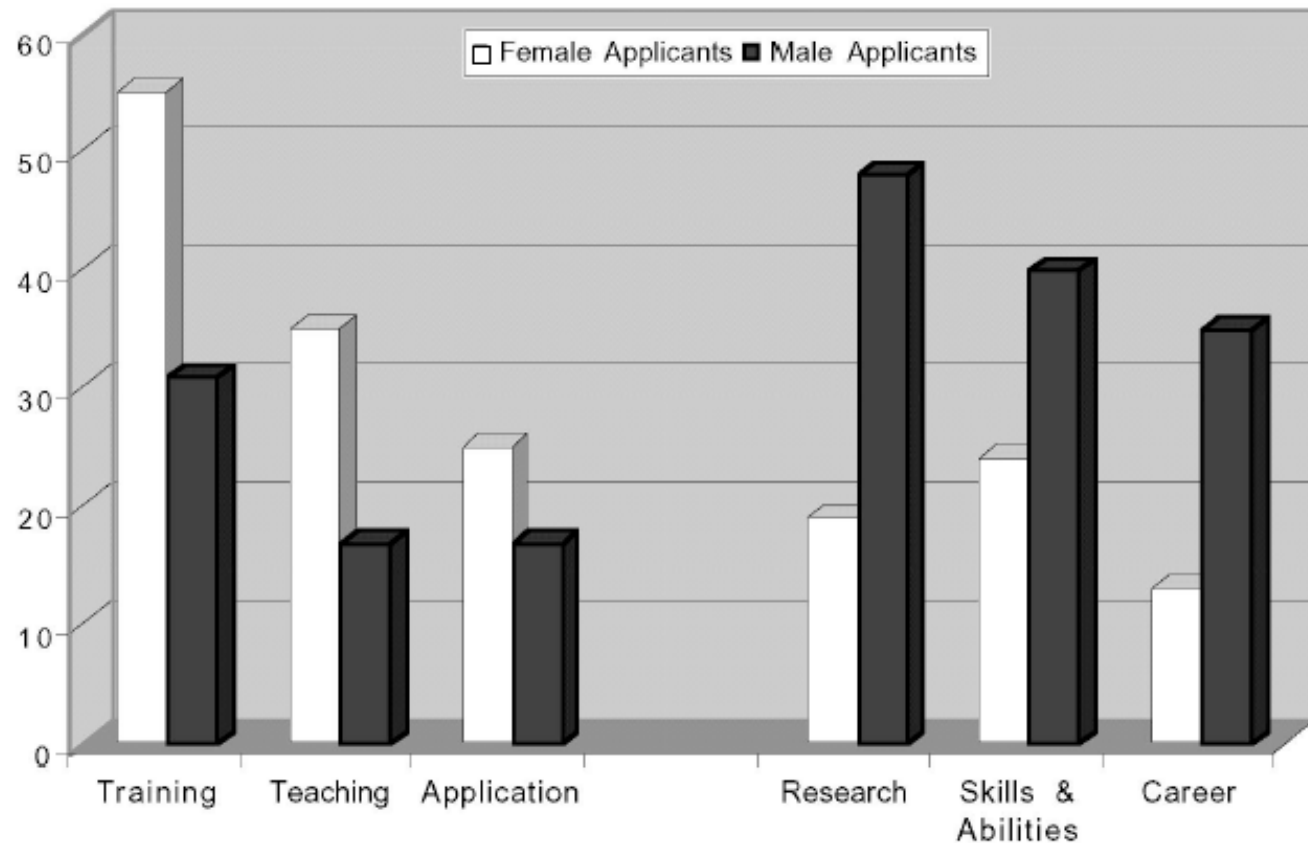


FIGURE 3. *Semantic realms following possessives. Rank-ordered within gender sets from equal numbers of letters 'her training'; 'his research'*

# Possessive Semantics

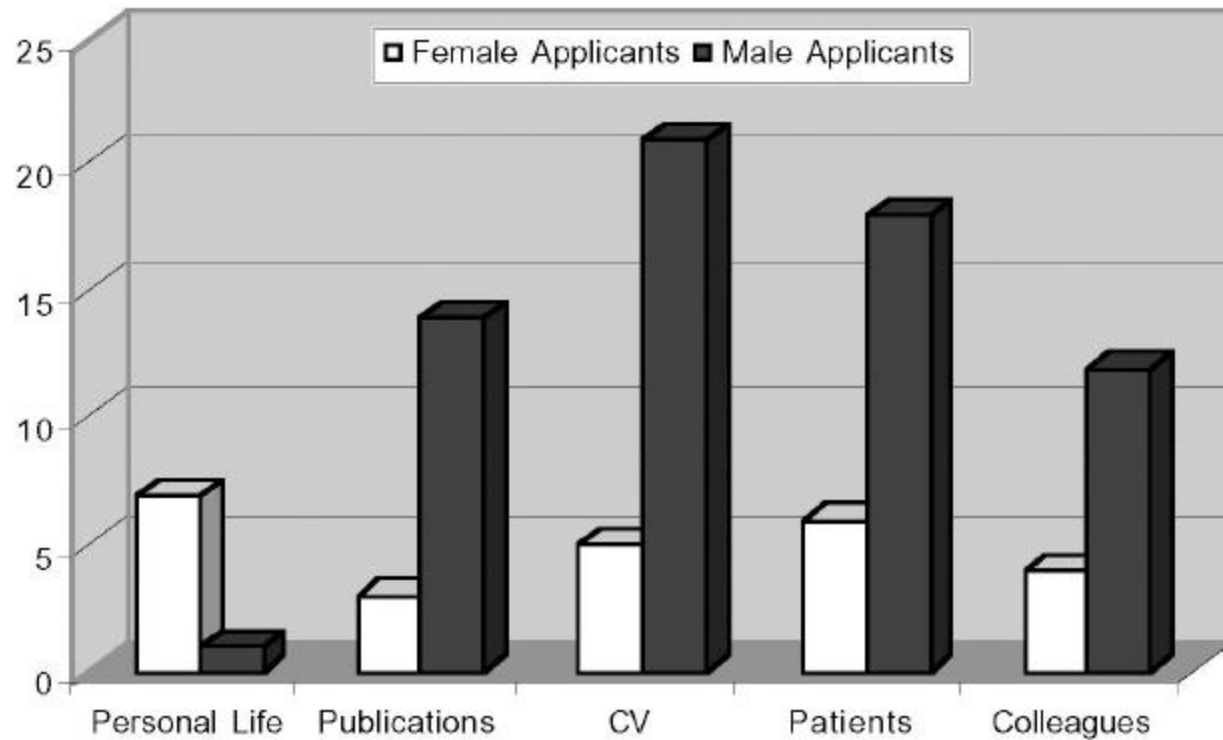


FIGURE 4. *Distinctive semantic realms following possessives. Greatest contrasts across genders in equal number of letters 'her personal life'; 'his publications'*

Pitfall	How to Avoid in Letters for Both Sexes
<b>Minimal Assurance</b>	Be specific, provide examples; focus on comparing the applicant with the requirements of the job.
<b>Gender Terms</b>	Replace “man” or “woman” with role, e.g., investigator, clinician, educator
<b>Stereotypic Adjectives</b>	Focus on accomplishments, skills, and activities first, and more heavily than personality traits. Avoid unnecessarily invoking a stereotype (“She is not emotional...”).
<b>“Grindstone Adjectives”</b>	Avoid overuse. Be thoughtful when describing work habits and personality characteristics, and tie to specific projects .
<b>“Doubt Raisers”</b>	Avoid hedges, faint praise, unexplained statements
<b>Naming</b>	Use title & surnames for everyone instead of first names, unless using first name is standard in your field
<b>Possessive Semantics</b>	Depending on the desired role, be aware of how “his” & “her” are paired with “training,” “teaching,” and “personal life” vs. “research,” “skills,” “career,” “publications,” etc.

# Example

## Overly focused on interpersonal skills: a gender stereotype

- ... quite gifted interpersonally: she is easy to get along with and quick to understand social situations.
- ... cares about her work and the needs of others around her.

## Focused on the technical requirements of the position

- ... with the necessary scientific methodological expertise to result in a complex and insightful dissertation study.
- ... technically skilled, deeply knowledgeable, resourceful, success oriented, and a pleasure to work with.





# **LEGAL ISSUES**

# Defamation

Requires proof of:

1. A false and derogatory statement about an individual
2. Communication of this to another person (written= libel, verbal = slander)
3. Actual harm to the individual resulting from this statement

# Legal Issues

- Don't disclose info without written permission
- Ask requestor to waive right of access
- Only share factual, truthful statements
- If there is pertinent negative information, advise requestor and re-confirm request that you write the letter

# General Recommendations for Writers: Writing the Letter

- Be short & clear, use formal format and tone
- Provide the information you'd want to know
- Discuss most relevant skills or characteristics
- Use specific, objective data and supplement with interpretations or explanations
- Tailor your letter; be specific
- Choose words carefully, be authentic
- Offer contact info for clarification, questions

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