

Avoiding racial bias in letter of reference writing

Got a great student or junior scholar who is a person of color (POC)? Planning to write a super letter of reference? Don't fall into these common traps rooted in unconscious bias.

Mention research & publications

Letters of reference for POC can be considerably shorter and at times do not highlight publications or research quality, compared to letters for white scholars. Make sure you highlight critical research accomplishments of POC scholars in every letter!

Don't stop now!

In addition to being shorter, letters for POC are less likely to give ringing endorsements and only include minimal assurance (they can do the job) or veiled praise ('surprisingly sharp') rather than a ringing endorsement ('they are the best for the job').

Emphasize accomplishments, not effort

Letters of reference for POC can overemphasize background and limitations faced over accomplishments. Emphasize accomplishments (their research 'skills', or career'). Do not use 'grindstone' adjectives that describe effort alone, ex. 'hard-working' that associates with effort, but not ability.

We all share bias

It is important to remember that unconscious racial bias isn't just a white people problem. Research shows that people of all races and ethnicities are susceptible to this common pitfall. This is a problem for all of us - let's solve it together!

Adjectives to use with caution:
caring, compassionate, hard-working, conscientious, dependable, diligent, dedicated, tactful, interpersonal, warm, helpful

Keep it professional

Asmeret Asefaw Berhe and Sora Kim - University of California, Merced Based on Avoiding Gender Bias in letter of reference writing flyer from University of Arizona
<https://tinyurl.com/y8vub7nd>

Letters of reference for POC (especially those from lower socioeconomic status, international background, etc) are more likely to mention personal information that is not relevant for the application, or expose details that the candidate might not want exposed (DACA, first generation, socioeconomic background, etc). Unless otherwise requested by the candidate or relevant for the award/application, stick to professional accomplishments and make sure you use formal titles and surnames.

Stay away from stereotypes

Although they describe positive traits, adjectives like 'diligent', 'dedicated', 'caring' and 'helpful' or terms such as 'activist' are frequently used in letters for POC and can evoke racial stereotypes which can hurt a candidate. And be careful not to invoke these stereotypes ('she is not angry or intimidating', or that 'their performance is above what you would expect from someone with their background').

Be careful raising doubt

We all want to write honest letters, but negative or irrelevant comments, such as 'challenging personality', 'unique background', or 'ability to speak English' are common in letters for POC applicants. Let the application speak for itself. Don't add doubt unless it is strictly necessary!

Adjectives to include:

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