

Tips for Avoiding Bias in Nominations

Reference research and publications.

- References for men are considerably more likely to mention publications references to research, while references for women are more likely to describe their role as teachers and trainers. When superlatives and standout adjectives (e.g., “outstanding research”) are used in letters, they are repeated more often in references describing men.

Write enough!

- References about men are longer and more likely to contain clear endorsements, while letters of reference for women make only minimum assurance.

Mention accomplishments.

- References for men are more likely to mention accomplishments, while letters of reference for women are more likely to mention their hard work (so-called ‘grindstone language’).

Keep it professional.

- References for women are overwhelmingly more likely to mention personal life. Balance interpersonal skills with other characteristics, and only mention them at all if they are relevant to the role.

Stay away from stereotypes.

- Gender and racial stereotypes and adjectives have no place in letters of recommendation. If you’re describing stereotypical traits, ask yourself if these characteristics are relevant to the job. If possible, avoid referring to age, gender, disability, race, nationality, or religion – even if well intentioned, they can evoke bias in the reader.

Be honest, but don’t raise doubt.

- Negative and irrelevant comments are found more often in references for women. Have you ever written “*even though he hasn’t had formal training in XXX, he’s an impressive XXX?*” Delete that first half of the sentence and just focus on why the person is an excellent match for the position they’re applying for.

Use titles and surnames.

- References for men are more likely to use their full title, while women are often referred to by only their first name.

Consider who you credit.

- Men are more likely to be credited for big-picture science, while women are often credited for their supporting roles.

Counteract ingrained behavior.

- Women and people from other historically marginalized groups are more likely to minimize their accomplishments during the application process, so as their recommender, you have the capacity to go out of your way to counteract that.

Don’t rush.

- We are *all* more likely to make snap judgments when in a hurry, which can result in us relying heavily on stereotypes and unconscious biases.