Best Practices for Reading and Writing Letters of Recommendation

A letter of recommendation for admission, an academic position or promotion provides an overall assessment of the candidate's potential to excel in the new position: the *professional promise* and *evidence* to support that assessment.

1. focus on the applicant (and can include the commitment and relationship of the writer to the applicant)
2. description of the applicant's record
3. evaluation of accomplishments of the applicant, downplay effort and focus on impact
4. discussion of personal characteristics only to the extent that they predict potential growth and job performance.

Omission of one or more of these components provides the reader/evaluator only a limited understanding of the candidate's qualifications and is a "letter of minimal assurance."

Decide on what is valued for the position and what language is important to the discipline based on those criteria. Keep those criteria consistently in mind when deciding how to write and how much weight to give letters.

Letters may be biased in systematically racial or gendered ways. Both men and women, caucasians and people of color may apply and share the same assumptions. Learn to recognize:

❖ **Descriptive words that may be used differently in evaluating members of different social groups**:
  ● Grindstone adjectives (*hardworking, conscientious, dependable, meticulous, thorough, diligent, dedicated, careful*) are sometimes used more for women, implying that women succeed more   through effort than through ability.
  ● Ability traits (*talented, smart, able, capable, brilliant*)
  ● Communal adjectives *(affectionate, nurturing, kind, warm)* are negatively associated with hireability.
  ● Agentic adjectives *(ambitious, dominant, self-confident)*
  ● Standout adjectives (*excellent, superb outstanding, unique, unparalleled*) are often repeated more for men than women

    ❖ **Descriptive phrases can unintentionally influence a reader:**
  ● Using first names for women or minority faculty and titles for men: *"Joan was an asset to our department."* vs. *"Dr. Smith was an asset to our department*."
    ● Gendered adjectives: "Dr. Sarah Gray is a caring compassionate physician." vs. "Dr. Joel Gray has been very successful with his patients."
  ● Doubt Raisers or negative language: "*although her publications are not numerous" or "while not the best student I have had s/he*..." Letters for women have been shown to contain twice as many doubt raisers than letters for men.
  ● Potentially negative language *"s/he requires only minimal supervision" or "s/he is totally intolerant of shoddy research"*
  ● Faint Praise: "*S/he worked hard on projects that s/he was assigned*." or "*S/he has never had temper tantrum*s."
  ● Hedges: "*S/he responds well to feedback.*"
  ● Irrelevancy: "*S/he is an avid skier and stamp collector*."
  ● Unnecessarily invoking a stereotype "*She is not overly emotional*" or "*he is very confident, yet not arrogant*" or "*She is extremely productive, especially as someone who attended inner city schools and a large state university*."

❖ **Other tips:**
  ● Notice word count; letters for men tend to be longer than letters for women
  ● Be direct and specific and honest
  ● Have ample time before deadline; mentor trainees about how to prepare for and seek letters of recommendation
  ● Consult candidate regarding how to discuss special circumstances (ex: personal reason impacting productivity)
  ● Effective letters compare candidate to reference pool (top 10% of recent graduates), not an individual

References & Resources: Trix & Psenka, 2003; Schmader, Whitehead, & Wysocki, 2007; Madera, Hebl & Martin, 2009; Morgan, Elder, & King, 2013; Akos, P; Kretchmar J, 2016; Dutt, Pfaff, Bernstein, Dillard & Block, 2016; Madera, Hebl, Dial, Martin, Valian, 2018; University of Arizona ADVANCE; Women in Science & Engineering Leadership Initiative (WISELI), University of Wisconsin, Madison, Handout on Reviewing applicants: Research on Bias and Assumptions, and the ADVANCE Implementation Mentors Network. *rev. 9/18*