The Perils of Not Writing What You Mean

How to Write a Good Letter of Recommendation

Celeste Royce, MD

Huma Farid, MD

Department of OB-GYN, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center

Disclosures/conflicts of interest

Dr. Royce received support from the Dean's Discretionary Grant Fund

Agenda

- Discuss the importance of communicating what you mean in your letter of recommendation (LOR)

- Identify "code words" in the LOR

- Recognize bias in letters

- How to write a letter in challenging situations

What's your gut reaction?

Dear Selection Committee,

I am writing this letter to support Dr. Med, who has been a resident with us for the past 2.5 years and is in good standing.

Dr. Med completes all of his documentation in a timely manner and is kind to patients. He is diligent in following up with his patient labs and phone calls. He is respectful with all clinic staff and takes feedback well.

He is a team player and will always help his colleagues when they need anything.

He has been a successful resident in this program and will go onto become a successful fellow.
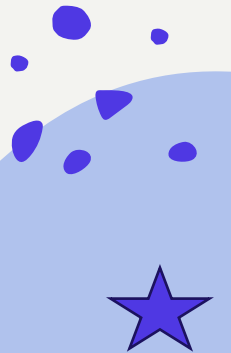
We all know why LOR are important...

- But how do we determine if we are the right one to write that LOR?

- Do you have any criteria for who you write a letter for?

- Do you ask the trainee or student to submit anything to you before you write the letter?
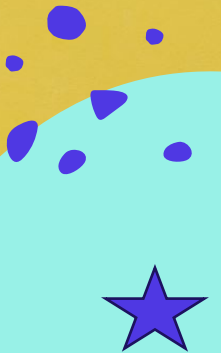
Audience response: what are desired qualities in a LOR?

Audience response: what do YOU include in a LOR?

Basic LOR Etiquette

TIMING

INFORMATION

INTERACTIONS

Evolution of Narrative Evaluations

Alexander et al. found 8 different grading systems with 27 unique sets of grading terminology among 119 medical schools

Proportion of students receiving highest grade 10-77%

On medicine sub-internship, 84% received honors

Over half sub-internship directors inflate grades to avoid penalizing students

MSPE's do not routinely include important information such as disciplinary actions, need for remediation, and comparative performance data

Shea et al Acad Med 2008
Alexander et al. acad Med 2012
Cacarnese,El-nicki, Spencer , TLM. 2007

Evolution of Narrative Evaluations

USMLE Step 1

USLME Step 2 CS

Increasing Pass/Fail grades

Recognition LOR's not predictive of success

Social Justice movement and recognition of bias

Basic Outline

The opening: "I am honored to write an enthusiastic letter giving my strongest endorsement to Dr. []."

Your role and how you know the candidate

Brief bio/background of the candidate

Identify 3 characteristics that make this candidate shine, devote a paragraph to each with examples from patient care, evaluations, research etc.

Summarize and conclude; if you would like to keep the candidate as a resident/fellow/attending, include that!
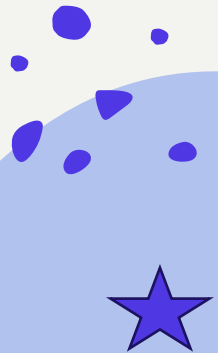
What characteristics should you discuss?

- Academics

- Clinical performance

- Extracurricular performance

- Awards/recognition

- Scholarship
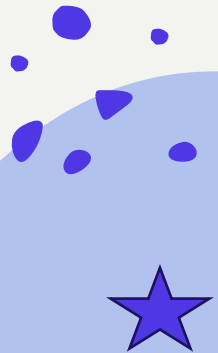
General Guidelines

- One or two pages

- State nature and length of relationship

- Consider opening with percentile rank in your experience

- Be specific with examples of clinical performance, scholarship work, or bedside manner, organizational style etc

- Tailor letter to the individual- career goals, intellectual ability, analytical skills, attitude toward learning, communication skills, initiative, motivation, and persistence, personal achievements.

- Conclude with overall recommendation

Recommended Best Practice for Letters

Include description of how grades are determined

Use standardized format and content

Include narrative comments to illustrate intangible qualities

Holistic summary of performance with multiple sources

Do not include content accessible in other documents:

- USMLE scores
- Grades
- Summative comments from narratives
- Summary of curriculum vitae

Overall assessment of applicant and suitability for position

Numerical statement of where student stands relative to other students in class, based on writers' experience.

- Examples: specific rank (e.g. 46/110), quartiles (1st,2nd, 3rd, 4th), percentage groupings (e.g. top 10%)

Vague letters adversely affect highly qualified applicants by not differentiating from less qualified

Lang et al, DOM Letters AAIM Persp, 2013

Formatting and Details

PROOFREAD YOUR LETTER

Use department/institutional letterhead and stationery

Correctly spell name and use correct pronouns

Sign the letter

Save a copy
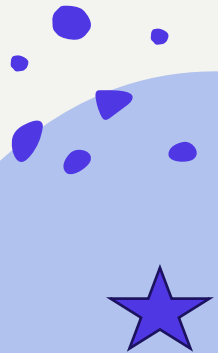
What should be included in a narrative?

Reference ACGME or EPA competencies

There is no uniform code

Linguistic equity- consider how you use the following:

- Agentic words, e.g.: leads, achieves, engages
- Stand-out words, e.g.: exceptional, unique

- Communal words, e.g.: compassionate, considerate, kind, agreeable
- Grindstone words, e.g.: dedicated, diligent, hardworking

Bias in Evaluation

Yes, it exists

Individual Attribute Use by Gender

Take home: Individual attributes differ by gender (e.g., females less frequently described as "smart," "active")

High overall utilization & large difference between groups

Attributes:
C=Competence
P=Personality
G=Grindstone
S=Stand Out

Female Less Frequent
Female More Frequent

Compassionate-P
Thoughtful-C
Wonderful-S
Team Player-P
Organized-G
Smart-C
Calm-P
Efficient-C
Eager-G
Active-P
Engaged-G

Absolute standardized difference between gender groups

Overall attribute utilization rate (specific word/1000 words)

Luercio et al.

Variable
No. of letters
Agency (overall) ←
Skill
Strong
Lead
Dedication
Confidence
Active
Intelligent
Work ethic
Hard working
Desire
Independent
Achieve
Communality (overall) ←
Help
Eager
Compassion
Happy
Kind
Caring
Friend

Table 3. Regression results: multilevel negative binomial regression of agentic and communal terms in letters of recommendation by applicant and letter writer characteristics

| Variable	Outcome: Agency Terms		Outcome: Communality Terms	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Applicant female		1.08*		1.04
(Ref: applicant male)		(0.04)		(0.06)
Applicant URM or other		0.93*		1.03
(Ref: applicant white or Asian)		(0.03)		(0.05)
Writer female		1.09*		1.12*
(Ref: writer male)		(.04)		(0.06)

Grimm et al. J Am Coll Rad. 2020

Gender Bias

- Women more likely to be described in communal terms:
  o "Affectionate, warm, kind, nurturing"

- Women also more likely to be described in social-communal terms:
  o "Student, child, relative, mother"

- Men more likely to be described in agentic terms:
  o "Ambitious, dominant, and self-confident"

Madera. Gender and Letters of Recommendation for Academia: Agentic and Communal Differences

Why does this matter?

Greater # of communal characteristics in LoR led to lower ratings of hireability

Madera. Gender and Letters of Recommendation for Academia: Agentic and Communal Differences
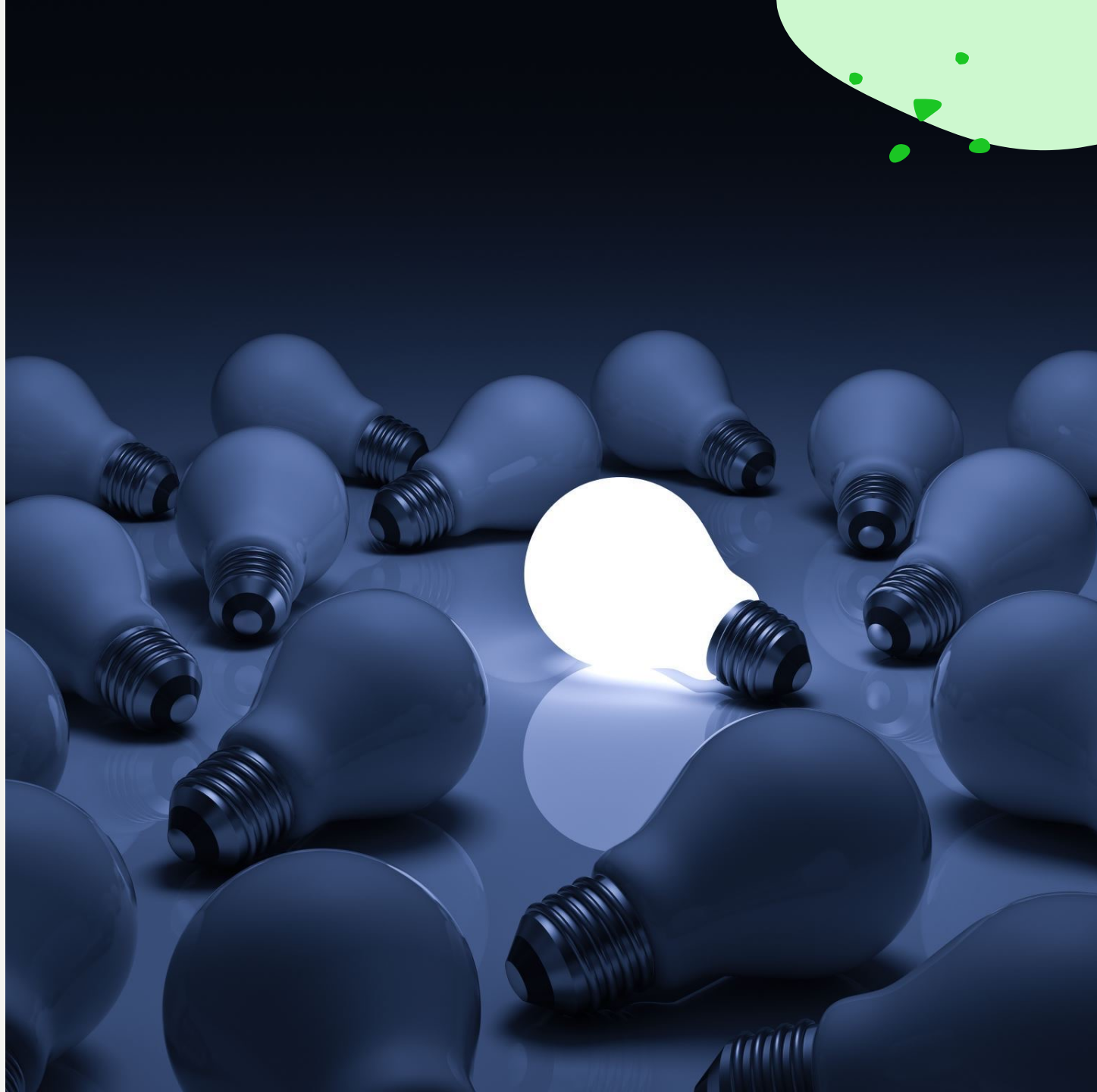
Individual Attribute Use by UiM Status
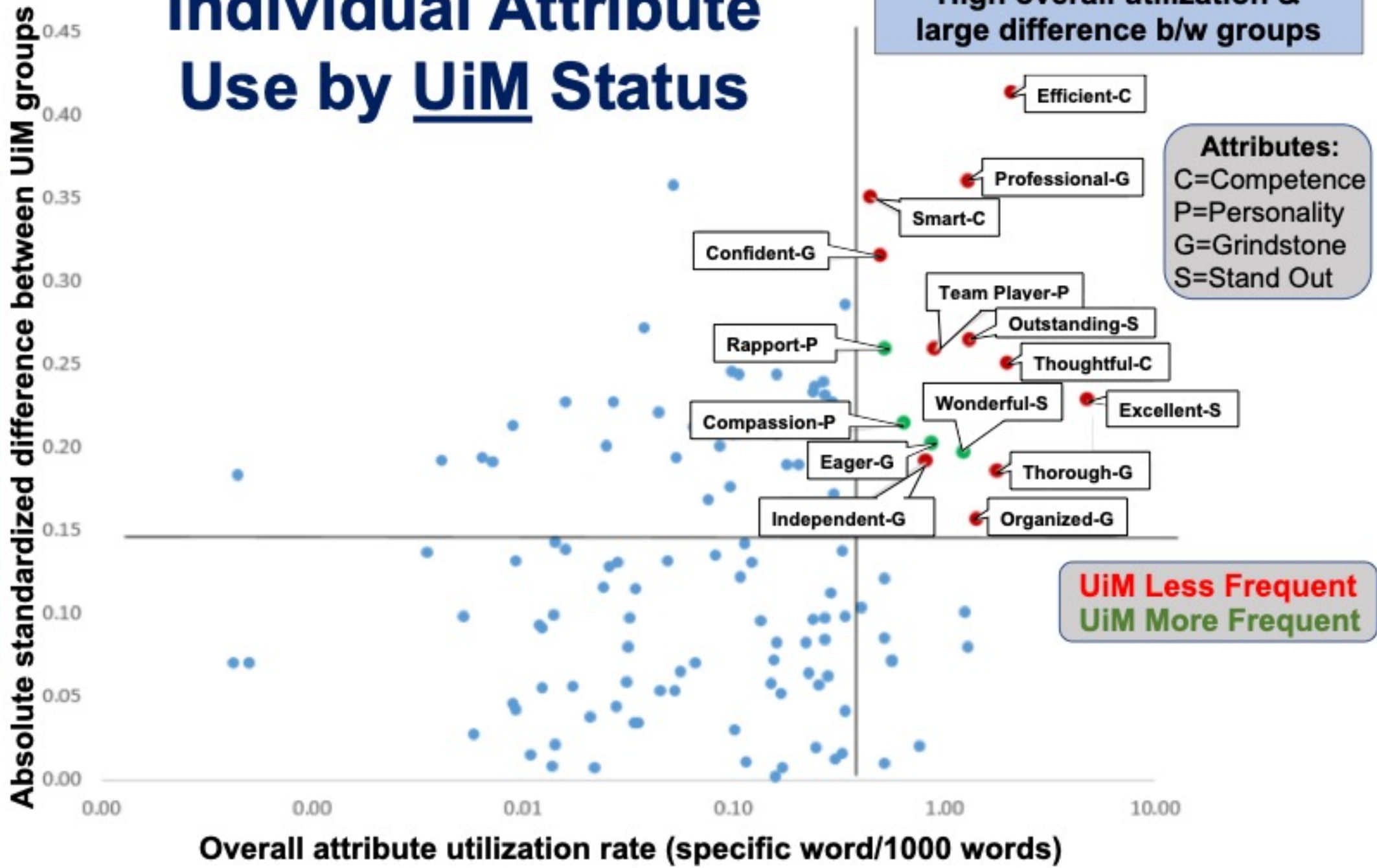
Luercio et al.

Table 4. Agentic and communal terms used at least 200 times by applicant ch

Variable	Overall	White or Asian Applicant (n = 565)	URM or Other applicant (n = 171)
No. of letters	2,624	2,011	613
Agency (overall)	3.50 (2.72)	3.59 (2.74)	3.24 (2.62)
➡ Skill	0.83 (1.16)	0.86 (1.18)	0.74 (1.08)
➡ Strong	0.50 (0.81)	0.51 (0.81)	0.47 (0.83)
Lead	0.36 (0.86)	0.38 (0.88)	0.30 (0.80)
Dedication	0.31 (0.64)	0.31 (0.63)	0.32 (0.66)
➡ Confidence	0.31 (0.59)	0.32 (0.59)	0.28 (0.58)
Active	0.26 (0.57)	0.27 (0.58)	0.23 (0.51)
Intelligent	0.16 (0.39)	0.16 (0.39)	0.17 (0.40)
Work ethic	0.25 (0.51)	0.26 (0.51)	0.23 (0.49)
Hard working	0.16 (0.41)	0.16 (0.41)	0.14 (0.38)
Desire	0.11 (0.38)	0.11 (0.38)	0.11 (0.37)
Independent	0.12 (0.39)	0.13 (0.40)	0.12 (0.37)
Achieve	0.12 (0.39)	0.12 (0.38)	0.14 (0.39)
Communality (overall)	1.42 (1.56)	1.42 (1.52)	1.42 (1.69)
Help	0.47 (0.84)	0.47 (0.82)	0.48 (0.91)
Eager	0.21 (0.49)	0.21 (0.49)	0.22 (0.50)
Compassion	0.20 (0.49)	0.20 (0.50)	0.20 (0.44)
Happy	0.13 (0.39)	0.14 (0.39)	0.12 (0.37)
Kind	0.13 (0.38)	0.13 (0.39)	0.11 (0.36)
Caring	0.10 (0.33)	0.10 (0.32)	0.11 (0.37)
Friend	0.09 (0.31)	0.08 (0.31)	0.09 (0.34)

Results are mean count (SD) of agentic and communal terms per letter.

Grimm et al. J Am Coll Rad. 2020

EM Residents, Race and the SLOE

- UIM applicants consistently rated to have:
  - Decreased work ethic
  - Decreased ability to create differential dx and treatment plan
  - Increased need for guidance during residency
  - Decreased prediction of success in residency

Alvarez. Ethnic and Racial Differences in Ratings in the Medical
Student Standardized Letters of Evaluation (SLOE)

Radiation Oncology and Bias

"LORs for UIM applicants had fewer standout descriptors like "best," "leader," and "exceptional" in their LORs compared to their White and Asian counterparts, suggesting that implicit biases may be present in the selection process."

Chapman. Linguistic Biases in Letters of Recommendation for Radiation Oncology Residency Applicants from 2015 to 2019

Code Words

- Over ¾ of PDs/APDs look for specific keywords in LoRs
- Top []% of students
- "We are recruiting this candidate"

- Vs...."I recommend to your program"

Jn Pierre. Attitudes towards and impact of letters of recommendation for anesthesiology residency applicants
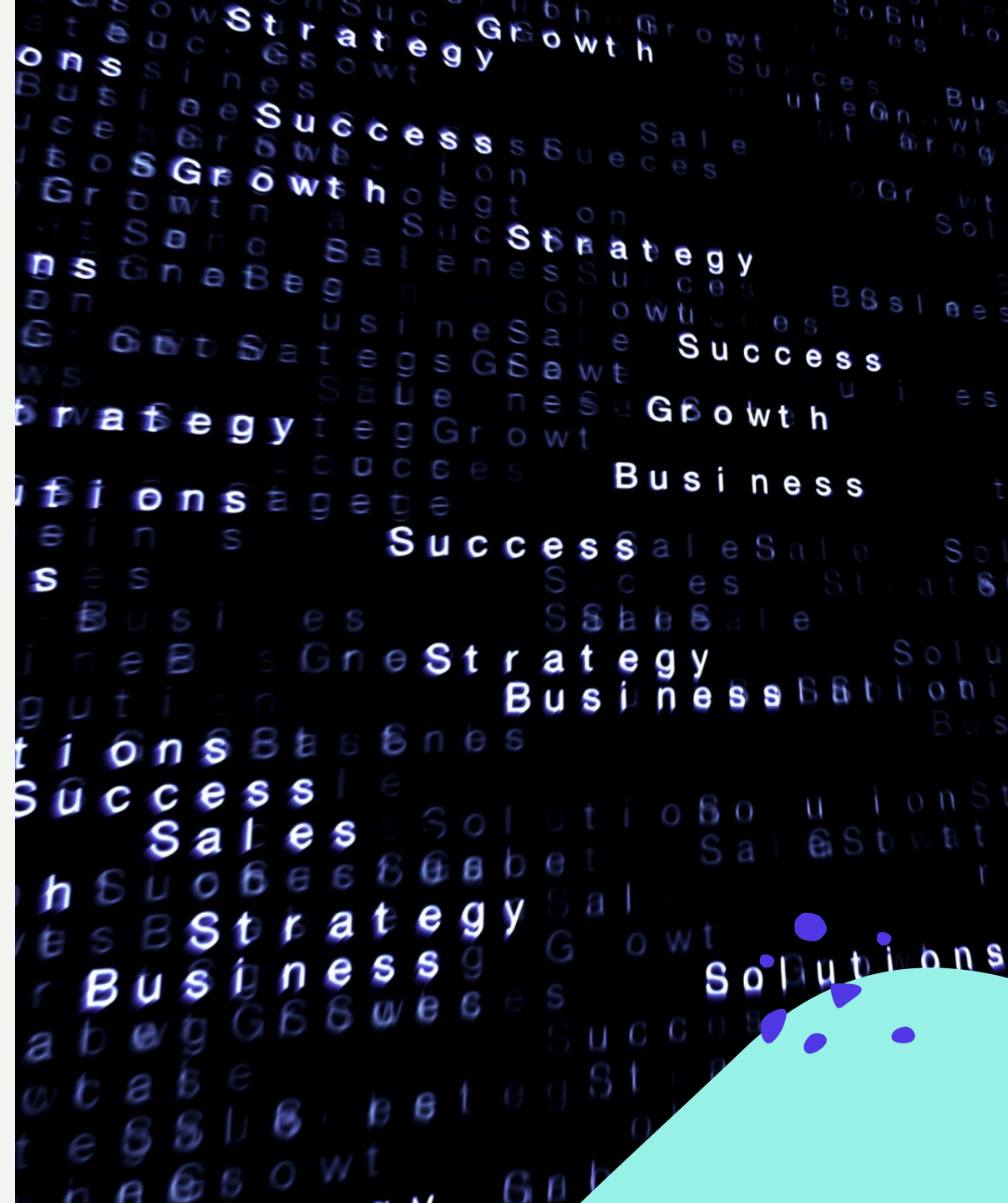
Avoiding gender bias in reference writing

Got a great student? Planning to write a super letter of reference?
Don't fall into these common traps based on unconscious gender bias.

Mention research & publications

Letters of reference for men are 4x more likely to mention publications and twice as likely to have multiple references to research. Make sure you put these critical accomplishments in every letter!

Don't stop now!

On average, letters for men are 16% longer than letters for women and letters for women are 2.5x as likely to make a minimal assurance ('she can do the job') rather than a ringing endorsement ('she is the best for the job').

Emphasize accomplishments, not effort

Letters for reference for men are more likely to emphasize accomplishments ('his research', 'his skills', or 'his career') while letters for women are 50% more likely to include 'grind-stone' adjectives that describe effort. 'Hard-working' associates with effort, but not ability.

We all share bias

It is important to remember that unconscious gender bias isn't a male problem. Research shows that women are just as susceptible to these common pitfalls as men.
This is a problem for all of us - let's solve it together!

Keep it professional

Letters of reference for women are 7x more likely to mention personal life - something that is almost always irrelevant for the application. Also make sure you use formal titles and surnames for both men and women.

Stay away from stereotypes

Although they describe positive traits, adjectives like 'caring', 'compassionate', and 'helpful' are used more frequently in letters for women and can evoke gender stereotypes which can hurt a candidate. And be careful not to invoke these stereotypes directly ('she is not emotional').

Be careful raising doubt

We all want to write honest letters, but negative or irrelevant comments, such as 'challenging personality' or 'I have confidence that she will become better than average' are twice as common in letters for female applicants. Don't add doubt unless it is strictly necessary!

Adjectives to avoid:
caring
compassionate
hard-working
conscientious
dependable
diligent
dedicated
tactful
interpersonal
warm
helpful

Adjectives to include:
successful
excellent
accomplished
outstanding
skilled
knowlegeable
insightful
resourceful
confident
ambitious
independent
intellectual

brought to you by:

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
Commission on the Status of Women

Follow us on www.facebook.com/uacsw

https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding_gender_bias_in_letter_of_reference_writing.pdf

De-biasing Strategies: What to avoid

Doubt-raising language or stereotype threat
- "X is as devoted to her patients as she is to her family, a difficult balance for a mother"
- "While working in an Islamic country can be difficult for members of the LGBT community, Y was able to achieve the program goals"
- "Z is passionate about addressing healthcare disparities in her community, often starting a vigorous debate"
- "W is reserved, but works with a quiet efficiency"

Personality or Personal Appearance
- "a pleasure to work with"; lovely; bright; "brings a smile"
- Any comments on appearance

Stereotypical traits
- Communal vs. Agentic
- Coded language: polite, quiet, reserved; articulate, clean; nurturing, compassionate

De-biasing Strategies: Best practices

Use standard formation and comment on each metric for each applicant
- leadership potential
- likelihood of success: clinical, academic, other
- degree and nature of contact with applicant
- ACGME competencies, EPAs, institutional rubrics

Get to know your learner- understand strengths, background, challenges

Draw on multiple and diverse sources for evaluations

Apply editing software to search text data for bias (Text IQ, Microsoft Ideas in Word).
- https://www.tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/
- built-in editor functions
- Microsoft Word with M365 subscription
  - click Review, then click Editor. Scroll down and you'll see an Inclusiveness section where you should check the box.

How do you write a letter when the candidate is... not a superstar?

- Be honest
  - I am concerned that I will not be able to write you the strongest letter of recommendation for the following reasons...
  - I do not have time

- If you are the PD or the Chair and must write a letter, then:
  - Do not exaggerate or make up attributes
  - Emphasize the true positives
    - A short letter speaks volumes

Breakout Rooms

Bo: Ahead of the pack?

Bo is a senior student applying in OBGYN. Bo attended a highly selective undergraduate college as a Division 1 athlete, maintained a stellar academic record, earned a top MCAT score. Bo's mother and grandfather attended your medical school and are regular contributors to the alumni association scholarship foundation. Bo is in the top 10% of the graduating class, has 3 publications and another manuscript in revisions, and has leadership roles in several student organizations, including serving as national president for a student advocacy group.

Bo completed the OBGYN clerkship at the main tertiary care site, and now is on an acting internship at your site, a large safety-net hospital. As acting intern, Bo takes responsibility for multiple patients, and their work is at or above intern-level in patient care.

Bo talks frequently about their research projects with a nationally known faculty member and boasts about being first author on several upcoming publications. Bo occasionally compares the residents in your program unfavorably to those at the other hospital. A scrub tech tells you Bo referred toa patient with obesity undergoing a cesarean, "That whale had so much blubber I couldn't hold the retractor".

Bo asks you as aPD for a letter of recommendation. You review Bo's portfolio and find there was an unproven charge of cheating against Bo in the 1st year of medical school. At your departmental meeting, the clerkship director notes the residents commented that Bo had "sharp elbows" and was a "gunner". You are concerned Bo's goals align do not with the programs's goals for training residents or the department's values, and wonder if Bo would be a great catch for the program across town at Another Great Medical School.

Adrien: Taking the fifth

Adrien is a 5th year student at This Great School of Medicine (TGSOM) applying in your field. Their pre-clerkship grades were in the 3rd quintile.

Adrien attended a top state research university, graduated with top 1% GPA and MCAT scores, and had 2 publications prior to medical school

Adrien was described as quiet, "introverted", "never asked questions", "needed guidance", "not a self-starter". One resident commented "Adrien was a hard worker but never really talked to anyone".

Adrien applied to 45 programs and received 9 interviews. They ranked all 9 programs but did not match. After reviewing options with their advising team, Adrien decided not to participate in the SOAP and instead opted to take a 5th year for research. Adrien is working with Dr. Workhard and is completing a project investigating serum biomarkers .

Adrien has been coming to clinic once a week to scribe for you and shadow. They are motivated, hardworking, efficient, and accurate in note taking, interact easily with staff and patients, but seem reserved around faculty and residents. Despite encouragement, they do not participate in any departmental social events during the year. Your colleagues describe Adrien as "stand-offish", "shy", even, "I'm not sure who that is?"

As the new clerkship director, Adrien asks you for a letter of recommendation. Adrien will also have an updated letter from their PI.

Che: Underperforming?

- Che is a resident in your department applying for fellowship in your specialty. Che had a challenging route to medicine, grew up in foster care, and attended state university on scholarship, earning grades and MCAT scores in the top 15%.

- In medical school, Che's grades were in the lowest quintile. Che participated in several extracurricular activities and a student advocacy organization. Che has continued to tutor pre-med students as a volunteer, and chose their continuity clinic at a community health. Che plans to return to their community to provide linguistically and culturally concordant care after fellowship.

- Che's one research project was a qualitative interview project evaluating barriers to patient engagement with and access to medical care. The project won't be concluded before Che applies for fellowship.

- Che's evaluations in patient care, professionalism and interpersonal communication skills are outstanding from all sources. Che meets weekly with the PD for feedback on their performance and keeps a feedback journal to help with their reflection and progress. Che is well loved by staff and has an outstanding ability to connect with patients and families.

- You have now been promoted to Vice Chair for Education and Che asks you for a letter of recommendation.

Report Out

What was a challenge when you were trying to write this letter?

When you love the candidate:

I am thrilled to write a letter of recommendation for XXX, who is currently a senior in excellent standing at XXX High School and University of XXX. X's academic achievements speak for themselves, with a 3.979 unweighted GPA/4.57 weighted GPA at High School and a 4.0 at the program. She received the President's Award for Educational Excellence in 2019 and was selected for the National Youth Leadership Forum for academic excellence. She is motivated, intelligent, and incredibly hard working, and I have no doubt that she will succeed in whatever she sets her mind to.

I first met XXX when she reached out to me via email after reading a blog post I had authored for the Harvard Health Blog. One of the hazards of academic medicine is that I receive a lot of email daily, but XX's maturity, dedication, and passion shone through even in email, and I had to respond—and I am so glad that I did. XX is a wonderfully bright light who has been a joy to work with. She is the co-founder of the Passionate Period Project, an organization that is completely funded by donations and provides free menstrual hygiene products to XX's high school. It is rare to find a high school student who has shown such initiative and passion for her work; moreover, it is rare to find a high school student who has the maturity and dedication to identify a need, understand how to address it, and create a program that will outlast her and provide lasting benefit to her community. As someone who recruits and trains resident physicians, these are traits that I would expect at the level of someone who is just finishing medical school, not a teenager who is just embarking on her career.