Avoiding gender and racial bias in reference letters

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 2.8x 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 ‘grindstone’ 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 ?x 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 knowledgeable insightful resourceful confident ambitious independent intellectual

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 ring 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

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

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!

Source: https://aaberhe.com/equity/