



## EXAMPLES OF BIAS IN LETTERS TO WATCH OUT FOR

*Based on the work of*

Trix, F. & Psenka, C. (2003). Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty. *Discourse & Society*, 14(2), 191-220.

### Length of Letters and Level of Assurance

- Recommendation letters for women are often shorter for women than for men.
- Shorter letters are *often* associated with *minimum assurance*.
- To achieve full or maximum assurance, a letter of recommendation must include:
  1. commitment and relationship of recommender with the applicant
  2. specificity of focus and record of applicant
  3. evaluation or comparison of traits and accomplishments

Anything less is considered minimal assurance

### *SAMPLE LETTER*

*Dear Dr Alfred Koop:*

*It gives me great pleasure in writing this recommendation letter for Dr Sarah Gray. I have known Sarah as a resident and as staff at The Metropolitan Hospital. She is knowledgeable, pleasant, and easy to get along with. I have no hesitation in recommending her for a faculty position at Centvingcinq. I will be happy to answer any further questions in this regard.*

*Charles Lewis, MD, Chairman, Department of Psychiatry*

This letter shows commitment and relationship to applicant but that's all, making it a letter of minimal assurance.

FINDINGS: 15% for women's and 6% for men's letters

### Use of Gender in the Letter

- Dr Gray is a thorough, hardworking, extremely intelligent and insightful **woman**.
- On a personal level Sarah is, in my opinion, the quintessence of the contemporary **lady** physician who very ably combines dedication, intelligence, idealism, compassion and responsibility without compromise.
- I believe Dr Harvey to be a **man** of great personal integrity.
- He is entirely dedicated to patient care, personable, a **gentleman** in every sense of the word.

FINDINGS: 10% for women and 5% for men's letters

**Doubt Raisers**

- Negative Language

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*While* Sarah has not done a lot of this type of research . . .

*Although* his publications are not numerous...

- Hedges

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It *appears* her health and personal life are stable.

He *appears* to be a highly motivated colleague

- Potential Negative

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An independent worker, she **requires only a minimum of supervision.**

Bright, enthusiastic, he *responds well to feedback*

FINDINGS: 24% of women and 12% of men’s letters had at least one doubt raiser

**Stereotypical Language**

- Dr (William) Smith has been very *successful* in obtaining grants from both the NIH (National Institute of Health) and industry and has developed an excellent clinical trials group for the study and treatment of AIDS.
- His substantial record of publication in reputable journals, during those developing years, certainly attests to his overall research capabilities and *accomplishments*.
- Dr (Sarah) Simpson is a caring, *compassionate* physician who has excellent interpersonal relationships with patients and their families as well as nursing and medical staff.

FINDINGS: 16% of women and 4% of men’s letters had at least one of these

**Grindstone Language**

- She is an extremely *conscientious* and *meticulous* researcher who devotes her time to laboratory work and the training of graduate students in laboratory technique.
- She is a superb experimentalist – very well organized, *thorough* and *careful* in her approach to research.
- I have found William to be *hard-working, thorough, and conscientious* in providing all aspects of patient care.

FINDINGS: 34% letters for women and 23% for men had grindstone language