

# The Letter of Recommendation - From the Requestor to the Reference

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## Purpose

Learning a systematic approach to asking for a letter of recommendation as a requestor and for developing a letter of recommendation as a reference while being cognizant of potential biases is key to creating an effective letter of recommendation.

## Introduction

Letters of recommendations (LOR) are a vital part of the medical student and residency application process, but who trains students in the etiquette of asking and what to provide to their references? In turn, who trains the references on how to construct a strong LOR? There are no "official" guides for either of these important processes.

### Coaching students to:

- inform references as early as possible
- build professional rapport
- request the LOR in person

### Providing the reference with:

- CV
- information on the program
- specific accomplishments that highlights why the student is competitive for the placement
- offering to draft the letter for further discussions with the requestor

### For the reference:

- beginning with one's role and relationship
- assessment of the student compared to others
- extrapolation of PARs-Problem, Action, Result

### Once drafted:

- LOR must be analyzed for terms of unconscious bias
- Gender bias calculators and templates allow writers to maintain a focused, streamlined approach when writing LOR

## Unconscious Gender Bias Statistics<sup>6</sup>

1. Letters for men are 16% longer than letters for women
2. Letter for women are 2.5x as likely to make a minimal assurance ('she can do the job') rather than a strong endorsement ('she is the best for the job')

## Unconscious Gender Bias Statistics

3. Letters for women are 7x more likely to mention personal life; almost always irrelevant for the application
4. Letters for men are more likely to emphasize accomplishments while for women 50% are more likely to include adjectives of effort (hard-working) rather than ability
5. Letters for men are 4x more likely to mention publications and twice as likely to have multiple references to research



## For the Requestor

**HOW TO ASK:** In person is preferable if possible. Facial interactions and body language can allow one to gain a better feeling of how comfortable the reference feels in providing a strong LOR.

**WHOM TO ASK:** For medical students, asking the senior most attending and/or the one who knows you the best. Do not ask residents (although they can provide additional feedback to the attending to help facilitate a strong letter and true representation of your demeanor and hard work ethic). For others, asking your supervisor and/or individual who you have connected with and who has an understanding of what you are applying for.

**WHEN TO ASK:** Inform references as soon as possible. Writing a truly strong letter of recommendation takes time, possibly necessitating at least a few interactions between requestor and reference to ensure a representative letter is written.

### WHAT TO PROVIDE REFERENCE:

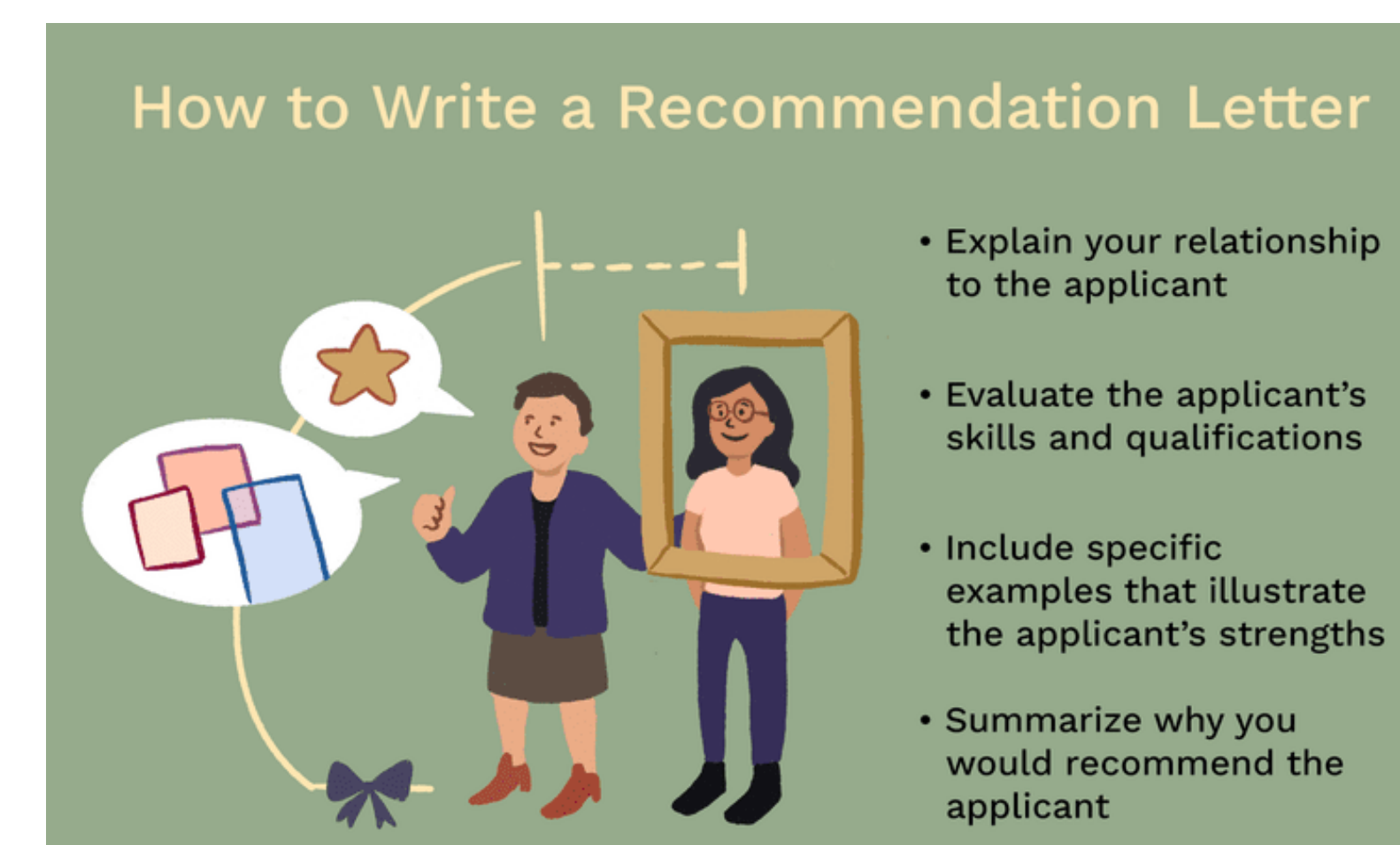
CV, information on the program/position, specific accomplishments which highlights why the requestor is competitive for the placement  
Offer to write a draft of the letter in order to further discussions may facilitate and aid in improving the LOR content<sup>7</sup>

## For the Reference

**HOW TO BEGIN LETTER:** Discuss your role, relationship with requestor and whether he/she waived their right to see the letter

**WHAT TO INCLUDE IN LETTER:** Your assessment of the requestor compared to others; lead with most compelling information up front

Use concrete examples (**PARs-Problem, Action, Result**) to show proactive solutions requestor instigated or led; try to be specific and as intentional as possible focusing on three strengths/accomplishments



## Adjectives to Avoid

1. Caring
2. Compassionate
3. Hard-working
4. Conscientious
5. Dependable
6. Diligent
7. Dedicated
8. Tactful
9. Interpersonal
10. Warm
11. Helpful

## Adjectives to Include

1. Successful
2. Excellent
3. Accomplished
4. Outstanding
5. Skilled
6. Insightful
7. Resourceful
8. Confident
9. Ambitious
10. Independent
11. Intellectual

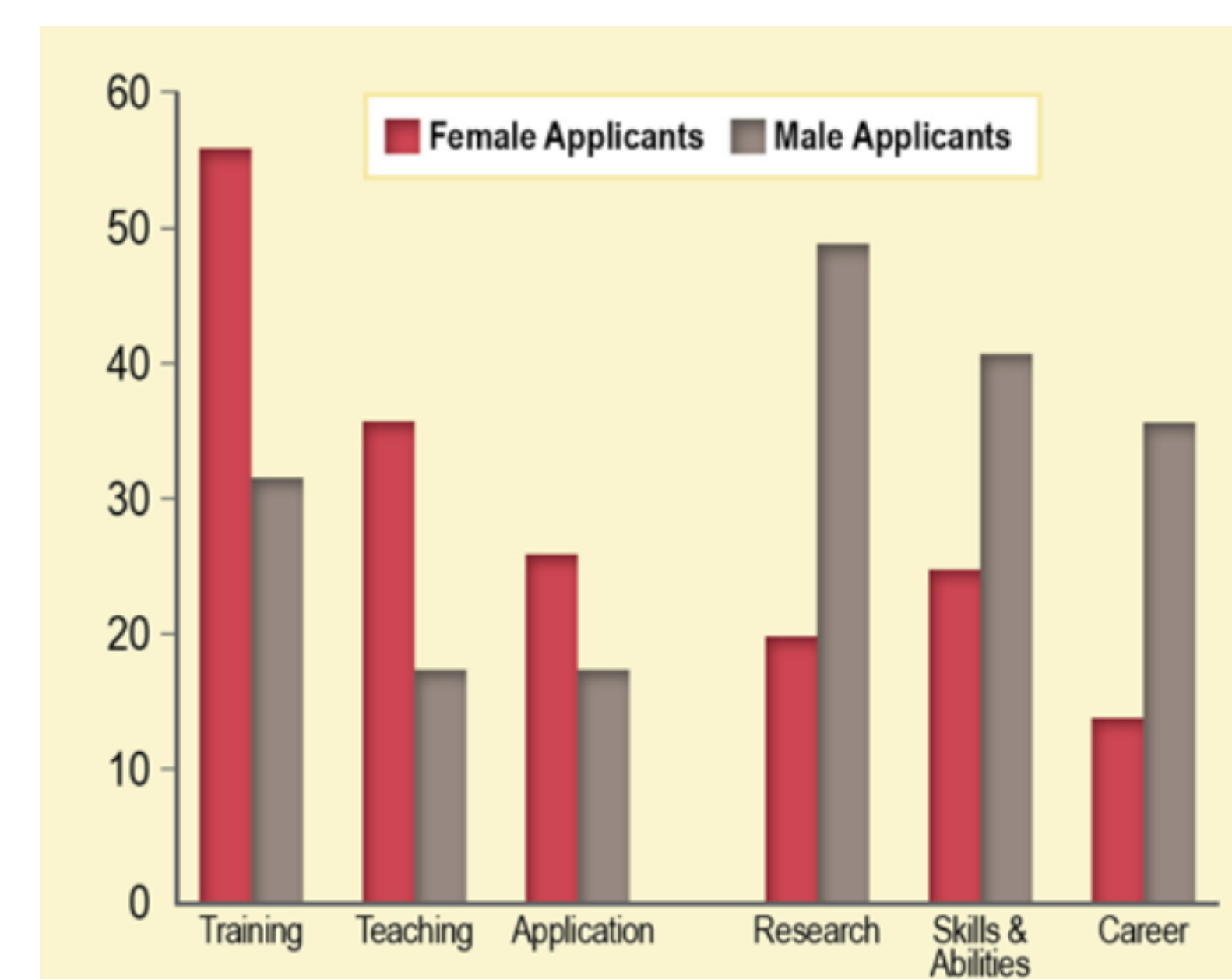


Figure 1: Out of 300 LOR written for research and clinical faculty positions at a medical school, researchers found letters describing the positive qualities of men more often emphasized their role as researchers and professionals, while letters describing the positive qualities of women more often emphasized teaching<sup>1</sup>

## Gender Specific Terminology

-Hardworking, Conscientious, Dependable; these "grindstone" adjectives can imply that women succeed *more* through effort rather than through ability

-Excellent, Superb, Unparalleled; often repeated for men rather than women

-Affectionate, Nurturing, Kind; communal adjectives are negatively associated with hire-ability and often are used for women

## Tactics to Mitigate Bias

1. Focus on concrete accomplishments and data supporting such
2. Ask someone to read your letter looking for gendered language
3. Gender bias calculators-can paste letter into calculator and words that are more often associated with woman will be added to the female list and those more often associated with men will be added to the male list
4. Requestor drafting a letter to facilitate discussions with or for the reference to facilitate discussions associated with a strong, unbiased letter

## Follow-Up

Thank your letter writer with a handwritten note or email. Let them know what happened with the decision, even if it is not a positive outcome. This is an opportunity to further seek professional guidance and/or let the reference know their contribution towards you achieving your goals.

## References

1. <https://www.ncwit.org/resources/how-can-reducing-unconscious-bias-increase-women%E2%80%99s-success-it/avoiding-unintended-gender>
2. <https://thedailytexan.com/2016/11/02/study-reveals-implicit-gender-bias-in-recommendation-letters>
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7. Currier Thomas T, Romero A, Kuper M, 2020, 'Perspectives and Practical Advice About Writing Your Own Letter of Recommendation', *MedEdPublish*, 9, [1], 37, <https://doi.org/10.15694/mep.2020.000037.1>