



Canadian
Cancer
Society

Guidance Document for CCS Emerging Scholar Award Applicant Referees

Applicants to the Canadian Cancer Society's [Emerging Scholar Award](#) competition require three letters of reference as part of their full application. One of the referees must be a former supervisor, and at least two must not be affiliated with the applicant's Host Institution.

Letters must be received no later than **October 15, 2020** (5:00 p.m. Eastern) in order for the application to be considered. Please note that applicants cannot view reference letters attached to their submission.

The letter of reference must be 1-2 pages in length, in PDF format, presented on official letterhead, dated and signed. Referees are to include a brief description of their credentials as well as their professional relationship with the applicant to put their recommendations into context.

The letter should address the following information regarding the applicant:

- potential to become a leader in cancer research in Canada and internationally
- commitment to cancer research
- progress towards research independence
- research productivity, with emphasis on their contributions to cancer research
- ability (or potential) to forge collaborations with other researchers in Canada and internationally
- track record (or potential) to attract and mentor high quality personnel

Best Practices for Writing Letters of Reference

Multiple studies have revealed notable differences in the language used by referees in letters of recommendation depending on the subject's gender. For example, several research groups that compared letters written for male and female applicants found that those written for females were shorter and included 'communal' and 'grindstone' terminologies describing character (e.g. selfless, helpful, warm) and effort (e.g. tireless, diligent, committed), respectively. Conversely, letters written for males were generally longer, emphasized achievements and included 'standout' and 'agentic' descriptors associated with leadership and power (e.g. outstanding, excellent, independent, daring, intelligent)^{1,2,3,6,8}. Similarly, albeit less studied, several groups have reported that the subject's race can influence the choice of words and tone used by referees when drafting letters, with fewer agentic terminologies used when describing individuals belonging

to minority groups, despite similar credentials with non-minority applicants^{1,4,5}. Collectively, these studies attributed the differences observed to implicit biases that can positively and negatively affect an individual's perceptions, behaviours and decisions in an unconscious manner.

Implicit bias is the unconscious association of attributes and stereotypes to people based on characteristics such as race, age, education, ability/disability, religion, socioeconomic status, and appearance. These biases are developed over time through exposure to social norms and expectations. As previously reported⁹, the effects of unconscious bias can negatively impact an applicant's overall success in obtaining research funding and reinforce further inequities in academia. It is, therefore, imperative to recognize when opportunities for bias occur and be vigilant in minimizing them.

Below, we offer best practices and resources from various sources¹⁻⁸ for referees to carefully consider when drafting their letters of recommendation:

- Focus comments on the applicant's research skills and academic achievements rather than their interpersonal attributes. Address the points requested and exclude personal information not relevant to the application.
- Carefully consider the choice of words, tone and length of the letter and whether they would differ depending on the subject's demographics. Consider whether the same descriptors would be used for another applicant with equivalent credentials, but of a different demographic background.
- Refer to the applicant's formal title and surname rather than their first name.
- Avoid using language that could unintentionally raise doubt (e.g. hedges, ambiguous comments, faint praises, potentially negative language, and irrelevancies). Provide concrete examples, when applicable.

Additional resources:

- CIHR Unconscious Bias Training: <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/lms/e/bias/>
- Harvard Implicit Association Test: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>
- Gender bias calculator: <http://slowe.github.io/genderbias/>
- The University of Arizona Commission on the Status of Women: Avoiding gender bias in reference writing: https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding_gender_bias_in_letter_of_reference_writing.pdf
- Earth Science Women's Network: Guide to avoid racial bias in reference letter writing: <https://eswnonline.org/guide-to-avoid-racial-bias-in-reference-letter-writing/>

References:

1. Akos, P. & Kretchmar, J. *Gender and Ethnic bias in Letters of Recommendation: Considerations for School Counselors*. Professional School Counseling. (2016).
2. Dutt, K., et al. *Gender differences in recommendation letters for postdoctoral fellowships in geoscience*. Nature Geoscience. (2016).
3. Filippou, P., et al. *The Presence of Gender Bias in Letters of Recommendations Written for Urology Applicants*. Urology. (2019).
4. Grimm, L., et al. *Gender and Racial Bias in Radiology Residency Letters of Recommendation*. Journal of the American College of Radiology. (2020).
5. Houser, G. & Lemmons, K. *Implicit bias in letters of recommendation for an undergraduate research internship*. Journal of Further and Higher Education. (2018).
6. Madera, J. et al. *Gender and letters of recommendation for academia: agentic and communal differences*. Journal of Applied Psychology. (2009).
7. Schmader, T. et al. *A Linguistic Comparison of Letters of Recommendation for Male and Female Chemistry and Biochemistry Job Applicants*. Sex Roles. (2007).
8. Trix, F. & Psenka, C. *Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty*. Discourse & Society. (2003).
9. Witteman, H. et al. *Are gender gaps due to evaluations of the applicant or the science? A natural experiment at a national funding agency*. The Lancet. (2019).

Instructions on submitting letters of reference

Access the website link included in your email notification. This page will be displayed:

Applicant	Joe Test	Program :	Emerging Scholar Awards - 2021	Show Documents
Application :	Emerging Scholar Awards test application			

Reference Letters

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45. *Reference letter		Show Instructions	
Attachment Title	File Name	View	Del
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Joe_Smith_Jane_Doe_reference	<input type="button" value="Choose File"/> Joe_Smith_J...ference.pdf	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

1. Click **Choose File** to upload your letter.
2. In the **Attachment Title** field, provide a title for the letter you are uploading. Use the following naming convention: applicant-name_your- name_reference e.g. *joe-smith_jane-doe_reference*
3. Click the **Save** button

Best practice tip: Check that your letter has been uploaded.

To confirm that your letter has been successfully uploaded, click the paperclip:

45. *Reference letter		Show Instructions	
Attachment Title	File Name	View	Del
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Joe_Smith_Jane_Doe_reference	<input type="button" value="Choose File"/> No file chosen	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Troubleshooting tip: URL does not work.

If the website address included in your email is not taking you to the page shown in the illustration above, this may be due to the URL being broken into two lines in your email display. Ensure that you are copying the complete website link into your browser.

If you have any questions regarding this process, please contact egram@caner.ca