Writing and Evaluating Reference Letters

Tips from Case Western Reserve Faculty Search Toolkit
Reference Letters: What to Include

- Clearly state the writer’s relationship to the applicant.
- Specify how long the writer has known the applicant, and in what capacity.
- Summarize the applicant’s skills and abilities, and the writer’s value judgment of these skills and abilities.
Reference Letters: What to Include

- State the applicant’s research record and the writer’s value judgment of that record
- Reference the applicant’s publication record and the writer’s value judgment of it
- Summarize the applicant’s teaching experience and the writer’s value judgment of it
Reference Letters: Common Errors

• **Doubt raisers or negative language:**
  – “Although his/her publications are not numerous…”
  – “While not the best student I have had, he/she…”

• **Potentially negative language:**
  – “S/he requires only minimal supervision…”
  – “S/he is totally intolerant of shoddy research…”
Reference Letters: Common Errors

• Faint praise
  – “S/he worked hard on projects that s/he accepted…”
  – “S/he is void of mood swings and temper tantrums…”
  – “S/he has been lucky in collaborations…”

• Hedges
  – “His/her health and personal life are stable…”
  – “S/he responds well to feedback…”
Reference Letters: Common Errors

- **Irrelevancy**
  - “He is very active in church…”
  - “She is quite close to my wife…”

- **Using gender terms for women and titles for men**
  - “A lovely woman, she was an asset to our department…” vs. “Dr. Smith was an asset to our department…”
Reference Letters: Common Errors

• Gendered adjectives
  – “Dr. Sarah Gray is a caring, compassionate physician…” vs. “Dr. Joel Gray has been very successful with his patients…”

• Gendered skill focus
  – “her teaching” vs. “his research”
  – “her training” vs. “his skills and abilities”
Reference Letters: Common Errors

- **Grindstone adjectives** (suggest women succeed through effort, men through abilities)
  - “She is hardworking” vs. “He is highly motivated”
  - “She is dedicated” vs. “He is highly intelligent”
  - “She is diligent” vs. “He is a rising star”
  - “She is dependable” vs. “He is inspired”
  - “She contributed” vs. “He wrote”