

EVALUATING EXTERNAL REFERENCES FOR FACULTY CANDIDATES

Resource Page #16

The search committee may specifically ask references to include the items listed below or suggest that candidates ask their references to include this information.

References should state:

- the relationship to the applicant
- the skills and abilities of the applicant and the referee's value judgment of these qualities
- the applicant's research record and the referee's value judgment of it
- the teaching record of the applicant and the referee's assessment of it
- the applicant's publication record and the referee's value judgment of it
- other additional items pertaining to this search as indicated by the search criteria

References can be systematically different depending upon the the social identity of the candidate. The following kinds of phrases, which may be the result of poor attention to writing rather than deliberate red flags, can unintentionally influence the reader:

- Doubt raisers or negative language: "although their publications are not numerous" or "while not the best student I have had, they" Potentially negative language: "they require only minimal supervision" or "they are totally intolerant of shoddy research"
- Faint praise: "they worked hard on projects that they accepted" or "they are void of mood swings and temper tantrums" or "they have been lucky in her collaborations"
- Hedges: "Their health and personal life are stable" or "they respond well to feedback"

- Irrelevancy: information that is not negative in itself, but lacking in academic characteristics such as "They are very active in church" or "They are quite close to my partner"
- 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."
- Gendered adjectives: "Dr. Sarah Gray is a caring, compassionate physician" vs. "Dr. Joel Gray has been very successful with his patients"
- Grindstone adjectives: showing that women succeed through effort, and men succeed through abilities or talent such as "She is hardworking" vs. "He is highly motivated," "She is dedicated" vs. "He is highly intelligent," "She is conscientious, dependable, meticulous, thorough, diligent, dedicated, careful" (all synonymous effort adjectives) vs. "He is brilliant, inspired, talented, a rising star, gifted" (all synonymous talent adjectives), or "She contributed" vs. "He wrote"
- Gendered skill focus: writing more about "her teaching" (often perceived as a more female skill) and "his research" (often perceived as a more male skill); focusing on "her training" vs. "his skills and abilities"

References:

*Madera, J. M., Hebl, M. R., Dial, H., Martin, R., & Valian, V. (2019). Raising doubt in letters of recommendation for academia: gender differences and their impact. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 34(3), 287-303.

[Avoiding Gender Bias in Reference Writing](#)