**THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY**

**Office of Postdoctoral Affairs**

214D University Hall
230 N Oval Mall
Columbus, OH 43210

614-688-1589  Phone

go.osu.edu/osupostdocs

**Instructions to letter writers for PPSP**

Please provide an overall assessment of the candidate's potential to excel in a postdoctoral position. Identify the characteristics and achievements that are directly relevant to the candidate's potential job performance. Focus your comments on criteria that are relevant for this evaluation. Traits that should be considered for discussion in a letter include past job/task performances, experience and expertise, intellectual ability, and personal attributes as they pertain to leadership quality, team building, perseverance, and communication skills.

Useful letters of recommendation include the following elements:

1. Focus on the applicant

2. Description of the applicant's record

3. Evaluation of accomplishments of the applicant

4. Discussion of personal characteristics only to the extent that they predict potential growth and job performance

Letters should consist of three parts: introduction and background, specific assessments, and summary of recommendation.

Limiting Unconscious Bias

According to a report issued by the American Association of University Women, implicit biases operate at an unconscious level, are influenced by our cultural environment and can impact our decision making. A study out of Wayne State University, which systematically compared letters of recommendation written for female applicants with those written for male applicants, found that, compared to the letters written for men, those written for women were more likely to:

- be shorter in length and incomplete;

- include gendered terms (e.g., woman, lady, mother, wife);

- include fewer 'standout' adjectives (e.g., excellent, outstanding etc.);

- include 'doubt raisers' (negative language, hedges, unexplained comments, faint praise and irrelevancies);

- focus on interpersonal attributes versus research skills/achievements (e.g., kindness, compassionate etc.); and

- include personal information that was not relevant to the position.

It is important to avoid unconscious bias within letters of recommendation as it can potentially have an unintended negative impact on the overall success/career of individuals—especially in the case of women. Research shows that social and environmental factors (including unconscious bias) contribute to the under-representation of women in science.

*How to Limit Unconscious Bias*

In order to limit the influence of unconscious bias within your letter, consider the following:

- Focus on comparing the nominee with the specific requirements of the type of Chairs position (i.e., Tier 1 or Tier 2, new or renewal).
- Avoid using stereotypical adjectives when describing character and skills, especially when providing a letter for a woman (e.g., avoid words like nice, kind, agreeable, sympathetic, compassionate, selfless, giving, caring, warm, nurturing, maternal, etc.).
- Consider using 'stand-out' adjectives for both men and women, where appropriate (e.g., superb, excellent, outstanding, confident, successful, ambitious, knowledgeable, intellectual etc.).
- Use the nominee's formal title and surname instead of their first name.

Consider whether your letter unintentionally includes gaps, or doubt-raising, negative or unexplained statements (e.g., 'might make an excellent leader' versus 'is an established leader').

Please check for gender bias in the letters of recommendation

  - https://www.tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/
  - http://slowe.github.io/genderbias/