

Recommendations and References: Tips for Faculty
October 30, 2009

Case 1

You are an attorney in the Office of General Counsel at St. Elsewhere Hospital. You receive a phone call from Dr. Reginald Researcher. Dr. Researcher is the PI in a large research lab at St. Elsewhere. Dr. Researcher tells you that one of his former Research Fellows, Dr. Joseph Veracity, is applying for a new position and has asked him to serve as a reference. Dr. Researcher tells you that Dr. Veracity was one of his best fellows and has great potential for a career in research. Therefore, he wants to be sure to give him the best reference possible to help him secure the job. There is, however, one problem he is worried about. A couple of years ago when Dr. Veracity was still at St. Elsewhere, he was alleged to have committed plagiarism with respect to a paper on which he was an author. A hospital committee reviewed the allegation and concluded that plagiarism (of a fairly minor nature) had occurred. Dr. Researcher tells you that Dr. Veracity took full responsibility for the event and he is quite certain it will never occur again. Therefore, he would like to avoid disclosing the incident when he provides a reference.

- What is your advice to Dr. Researcher?
- Would your advice be any different if the allegation had been made, but there had not been a formal review and conclusion?

Case 2

As soon as you finish your call with Dr. Researcher, your phone rings again, and it is Dr. Big Shot. Dr. Shot is a very prominent researcher at St. Elsewhere, and his work is nationally known. He tells you that he has just gotten a letter from a lawyer representing one of his former research fellows, Dr. Mary Meek. Dr. Shot tells you that about a month ago he got a phone call from Dr. George Genius, a colleague and friend of his who runs a research lab at a large and prestigious academic medical center in California. Dr. Genius told him that Dr. Meek was a finalist for a position in his lab. He told Dr. Shot that Dr. Meek's background and experience were just what they were looking for, and that her references were excellent.

Although Dr. Meek had not listed Dr. Shot as one of her references, Dr. Genius decided he would give him a call. He asked Dr. Shot to give him a totally candid "off the record" reference which Dr. Genius assured him he would treat with the utmost confidentiality. Dr. Shot tells you that he told Dr. Genius that Dr. Meek's performance at St. Elsewhere was pretty mediocre. Dr. Shot doesn't have any documentation about her performance

because every time he tried to talk with her about it, she would go down to Human Resources and complain that he was discriminating against her because she was the only woman in the lab. Dr. Shot told Dr. Genius that the final straw occurred shortly before Dr. Meek left his lab when she went so far as to accuse Dr. Shot of sexual harassment. Dr. Shot assures you that there was no truth to this accusation. Dr. Meek simply has no sense of humor.

Dr. Shot tells you that in giving the reference he did nothing other than offer his honest opinion about Dr. Meek, and he certainly wouldn't want his friend to make a mistake like he did in hiring someone like Dr. Meek. Dr. Shot reads you the letter from Dr. Meek's lawyer which claims that Dr. Meek was not hired for the position in California because of Dr. Shot's "defamatory" reference, and that Dr. Meek intends to pursue legal action against him. Dr. Shot asks you whether he has anything to worry about. What is your advice to him?

#109741

Harvard Medical School Policy

LETTERS OF REFERENCE

PRINCIPLES

Candor and forthrightness in letters of reference are of the greatest importance in maintaining standards of conduct and of quality among members of the medical profession. Such letters should include that information which the writer or any other prospective employer would wish to receive in order to make a well-informed decision; they should be inclusive rather than selective. The writer must recognize a responsibility to the person about whom the letter is written, to the person to whom it is written, to the institution in which the writer works, to the institution receiving information, and to society at large.

Ethical behavior and character should be addressed in a letter of reference, given that sound behavior and good character are essential to medical practice, teaching and research. On the other hand, letters should avoid unsubstantiated information that could unfairly damage an individual's career.

Although the writer may wish to have assistance regarding a letter's content and style, the ultimate responsibility for the letter resides with the author. If the writer is confused about what to include in a letter of reference, he/she may come to the Office of the Dean where either advice or referral to the University Counsel may be provided, if appropriate.

These principles apply to oral as well as written communications.

GUIDELINES

1. A faculty member should respond to a request for a letter of reference if he/she has reliable information, whether the information is favorable or unfavorable. A response is required from those in supervisory relationships or department heads.
2. Written responses may be supplemented by oral communications, but the letter should include all major points of concern and be consistent with subsequent oral information.
3. Letters of reference should be addressed to a named individual, not "to whom it may concern."
4. Each letter of reference should begin with a description of the sources of the information and the closeness of the relationship between the letter writer and the person about whom the letter is written. An assessment of the degree of reliability of the information should be included.
5. Hearsay evidence should be evaluated and verified, where possible, before a decision is made about inclusion in a letter of reference. If hearsay evidence cannot be verified, it is essential that the letter identify clearly which evidence is hearsay.
6. The writer of a reference has an obligation to warn, where the case demands, as well as to support.

Adopted on April 28, 1982.

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<http://www.hms.harvard.edu/integrity/letters.html>

BWH Reference Letter Guidelines for Researchers

When writing letters of reference, all Faculty should refer to the "Reference Letter" section of the HMS Faculty Policies on Integrity in Science at:

<http://www.hms.harvard.edu/integrity/letters.html>

Reference letters are a critical component of career transition and advancement, and, as such, impart a significant responsibility on the writer to ensure the letter effectively and accurately presents a fair, objective representation of the person being discussed. Such letters should include information that is factual, substantiated or directly observed by the writer. Written letters of reference should communicate the same information that would be communicated verbally if a potential employer calls for verification or elaboration. In all cases, unsubstantiated information or hearsay should be avoided.



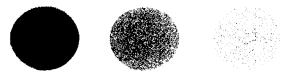
Conducting Effective Reference Checks

October 30, 2009

*Presented by: Lisa S. Ponton, JD
Vice President, Human Resources*



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Why Perform Reference Checks?

- References can provide valuable information about a candidate's work experience.
- Information gathered during the reference check should support the information the candidate supplied on the application/resume as well as supplement specific information gathered during the interview.
- Since past performance is often the best indicator of future performance, checking references can be one of the most important steps in the selection process.





How to Conduct Reference Checks

Remember to work with your HR Recruiter to determine who should conduct the reference. If it is determined that you will conduct the reference check; remember reference checking is an extension of the interview process. As such, questions that could not be asked during an interview cannot be asked during the reference process.





How to Conduct Reference Checks

Before beginning this process, make certain that you have a list of job-related questions to use for each candidate. Also, instead of asking the candidate for their reference list, you should request to speak with the actual supervisor since that person would have the best opportunity to observe the work performance of the candidate. This will provide you with a consistent frame on which you can base your hiring decision.

NOTE:

It is unwise to indicate to candidates that they will be successful pending the outcome of the reference check process. This sets up the expectation for the candidate that the job is theirs and if the decision is not in their favor, the candidate may interpret this as a negative reference situation.



● ● ● Tips in Speaking with the Reference

- Identify yourself, your title, organization name, and tell them why you are calling
- Ask if now is a good time to talk or whether they would prefer to schedule a call at a later time
- Make certain that they know you have the candidate's consent and all comments will remain confidential
- Provide a brief description of the role you are considering for the candidate

This will allow the reference to provide more specific context to your questions.



● ● ● Tips in Speaking with the Reference

- Give the reference enough time to answer the questions and follow up for clarity if needed
- Remember comments from one reference that are not supported by the other references should be considered in the context of the employment relationship. If you believe the reference is biased for or against the candidate you should not rely on their comments, therefore, seek an alternative reference.





Do's and Don'ts of Reference Checking

Examples are:

- **NOT ALLOWED:** This position may require some travel. I understand that [candidate's name] has children. Do you think that travel will be a problem for him/her?
- **ALLOWED:** Did [candidate's name] role included travel? Did he/she ever have any attendance or punctuality issues with his/her travel commitments?
- Any comments or criticisms relating to an applicant's disability, gender, race, or other potential grounds for discrimination are not relevant and should be disregarded.





Things to Watch For

In addition to your prepared questions, it may be necessary to ask follow-up questions.

For example:

- If you get a general response “He/she was great”, follow-up with a specific question “what did [candidate’s name] do to merit such a compliment?”
- If you ask would you recommend [candidate’s name] for the position as you described it and they say yes, follow-up with “What makes [candidate’s name] a good fit in your estimation?”





Tips For Providing a Reference

Ways to limit any possible liability in disclosing reference information can include:

- Provide only information that can be documented, such as dates of employment and title
- Require signed releases, including what information your company is allowed to disclose, from the former employee
- Train managers and supervisors on how to provide references



● ● ● Tips For Providing a Reference

- Require all managers and supervisors to refer requests for references to the human resources department
- Provide only truthful information that is job-related
- Respond only truthful information that is job-related
- Respond only if asked: Would you rehire this person?
- Never give opinions that are not based in documented facts



Effective Reference Check Questions

Establishing the Context

- How long and in what capacity have you known the individual?
- What were the job functions and did he/she perform them effectively?
- What were the beginning and ending employment dates for this individual?
- What was this individual's beginning and ending salary?
- What position(s) did the individual hold?
- What was it like to work in the organization? What were the unique dynamics?

Questions to Ask Managers/Supervisors

- How did this individual's performance compare to other employees with similar job duties?
- How much direction/oversight did the individual need?
- What is your view on his/her ability to work independently?
- Did he/she know when to seek guidance?
- Did this individual present clear data from the research?
- Has this individual shared authorship of any of your research? If not, why not?
- What motivates the individual?
- How does [candidate's name] handle conflict?
- Did you evaluate [candidate's name] performance? If so, what were his/her strong and weak points? What was noted as needing improvement and what did this individual excel at?
- What would you consider [candidate's name] biggest accomplishment while working for your company?
- I would like to describe to you the position we are hiring for. Please describe how good of a fit you think [candidate's name] would be for the position? What are his/her principal strengths for this position?
- Did the individual make sound and timely decisions regarding research protocols?
- What was the individual's experience working as a member of a team?
- Is there any additional information that you would like to share with me?
- Why did [candidate's name] leave the company?
- Does the individual communicate well orally and in writing?
- Would you feel comfortable having this candidate make presentations?
- Would you consider this individual eligible for rehire? Why or why not?

Illegal or Unethical Questions

- Does the individual have any disabilities or health problems?
- Is the individual married or does he/she have children?
- Has the individual made child care arrangement?
- Would you describe the individual's home life as stable?
- Does the individual care for elderly parents?
- Does the individual require time off from work to practice his/her religion?

Refinalizing a report

If additional responses are received after the report has been finalized, a green checkmark ✓ will be displayed in the Alerts column.

To refinalize the report:

Right-click the candidate's row and choose **Refinalize Report** from the Actions menu.

7. Evaluate the report

Important points to remember:

- Very Low and Low scores are “red flags”
- Medium Low and Medium scores are “orange flags”
 - Get further information, or consider a candidate with higher scores
 - If the score is on a critical competency, consider whether to continue with the hiring process
- The lower the scores, the more time and effort in coaching, training, and supervising the candidate will need to become a productive employee.
- A wide range of scores (indicated by a red flag next to the scoring graph) signals disagreement among the raters
- If no managers or supervisors responded, try to find out why
- Use the lower scores to focus questions in subsequent interviews

Troubleshooting FAQ

- If a candidate's status is “References Entered Not Sent” check their Reference Input Page. If the right number of references has been input and their status is “Entered,” then the candidate needs to click the Send references button.
 - If the Reference Status is...
 - **Entered:** Information has been submitted to the system, but no email has been sent
 - **Pending:** Email has been sent, awaiting response
 - **Bounced:** The email address was invalid, and needs to be changed
 - **Completed:** The response has been received
- If the candidate hasn't received the email, have him/her check their Spam or Junk Mail folder. If it's not there, resend it. If that doesn't work, contact Customer Service.
- If you have trouble printing the report from your web browser, try the “Landscape” orientation. (The PDF is automatically formatted to print in “Portrait” orientation.)
- If a critical reference doesn't have an email address, suggest that they use a public library computer to obtain a free email account. Contact Customer Service for other options, or select other references.
- Contact Customer Service voicemail at 610-422-3532, or send email to customerservice@skillsurvey.com



Pre-Hire 360™

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

This Guide highlights the key steps in the SkillSurvey process. For complete discussion, please see the User Guide.

1. Prepare the candidate
2. Enter the candidate information
3. Select the survey
4. Send the email
5. Monitor the process
6. Finalize the report
7. Evaluate the report

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1. Prepare the candidate

Before entering candidate info, make sure that he/she

1. Understands how many references are required
2. Understands who they should be
3. Knows to look for the email
4. Knows to gather and submit the reference information promptly
5. Understands his/her role in monitoring the process

2. Log in, and enter the candidate information

1. Log in at www.skillsurvey.com - enter your email address and password then click "LOGIN"
2. Click "Create New Candidate"
3. Enter the candidate's name and email address
4. Enter the name of the job position

Enter the candidate's information below. *denotes required fields

Candidate's First Name: *

Candidate's Last Name: *

Candidate's Email Address: *

Position Applying For: *

(e.g. "Sales Rep", "Customer Service Agent")

Position ID:

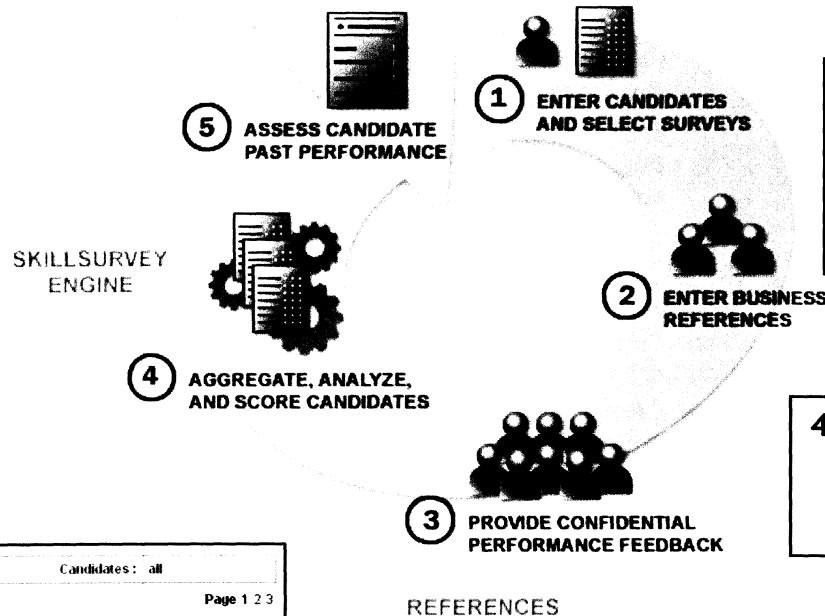
(For internal tracking purposes. Does not appear in Candidate email)

6. Finalize the report

1. When the report is ready, the candidate's Status will display as "Finalize Report"
2. Click the Finalize Report link, or choose Finalize Report from the Actions menu
3. Save the report in Adobe Acrobat format by clicking the "Save As PDF" button at the end of the report

(over)

RECRUITER/
HIRING MANAGER



3. Pick the survey

1. Open the appropriate folder
2. Click the survey title to select it
3. Right-click the survey title to view samples

HR Positions

HR Professional Positions

HR Manager Positions

4. Send the email

- Click the desired option

Candidate Inputs References

Individual Inputs references

The individual will receive an email directing him/her to the Reference Input Page.

You Input References

You input references

The Reference Input Page will be displayed, and you can enter the reference information yourself.

Name/Email	Position ID	Survey	Input Date	Refs Rec'd	Alerts	Status	Details
Windowpane, Cindi cindy.windowpane@yahoo.com	Mortgage Manager R12345	Executive	09/17/2007 12:24PM			No refs entered Resend email	Details
Showerhead, Steve stshowerhead@miscisp.net	Assistant	Executive	09/13/2007 11:22AM		🚩	Refs entered, not sent Resend email	Details
Schematic, Randy schematic1@yahoo.com	Process Engineer	Engineering Professional	09/12/2007 10:19AM		🚩	No refs entered Resend email	Details
Wannabe, Josie josie.wannabe@gmail.com	Customer Service	Customer Service Professional	08/20/2007 2:30PM	08/18/2007 10:22AM	🚩	0 of 5 received View Progress	Details
MacInterra, Jerome jmac@norbertfishbowls.com	Testing	IT Professional	08/18/2007 4:10PM	08/18/2007 4:17PM		View Report 09/17/2007 12:34PM	Details
Woodby, Johanna johanna.woodby@yahoo.com	Sales Technician	Customer Service Professional	08/18/2007 9:26AM			Refs entered, not sent Resend email	Details
Wannabe, George gwannabe@yahoo.com	Sales Assistant	Finance Professional	08/07/2007 12:08PM			No refs entered Resend email	Details
Wannabe, Jimmy	Sales	IT Professional	08/02/2007	08/16/2007		View Report	Details

5. Monitor the process

As the candidate enters reference information, and the references respond to the survey, you can monitor the process.

1. From the User Page, choose the desired View Candidates option (All Candidates, Candidates with References, etc.)
2. Click an Alert symbol 🚩 to display any alert messages
3. To access the candidate's Reference Input Page, select the entry in the View Candidates table, then choose Reference Input Link (View menu)
4. To cancel the candidate, select the entry in the View Candidates table, then choose Cancel Candidate (Actions menu)

Introduction to HR Concepts: What PIs Need to Know

COURSE DATES:

July 30, 2009

12:00 - 4:30 PM

One Brigham Circle 4-002E

November 11, 2009

12:00 - 4:30 PM

One Brigham Circle 4-002B



Delivered by:

BWH Human Resources

Organizational Development
and Learning Team

Sponsored by:

Office for Research Careers

Center for Clinical Investigation

CONTACT:

Caroline Rotondi

BWHORC@partners.org

(617) 525-9323

This workshop provides **Research Faculty** (including newly appointed PIs or established PIs seeking additional preparation for hiring and managing lab personnel), and **Research and Lab Managers** with the opportunity to learn about basic Human Resources information which support staffing and managing a successful lab.

Attendees will develop the knowledge, skills and tools to successfully manage productive postdocs, graduate students and technicians; promote a positive lab environment; and prevent difficult personnel challenges before they arise.

This interactive case-based workshop will emphasize key points from each of the following important topics:

- Fundamentals of Employment Law
- Performance Management
- Documentation

Please register using the online calendar available at www.brighamandwomens.org/calendar

Course Details:

www.brighamandwomens.org/research/OPRC/PI.asp



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- » [Postdoc Life @ BWH](#)
- » [Benefits & Policies](#)
- » [Professional Pathways](#)

Staffing Your Lab: A Postdoc New Hire Toolkit

POSTING A POSTDOC POSITION:

If you would like to post a monthly paid postdoc position, you have the option of completing the "short" [job requisition form](#), found on the HR website along with needed forms and instructions. HR will post the position to the BWH website, where it is available to external and internal applicants.

INTERVIEWING:

[Staffing Your Lab: Perspectives from Both Sides of the Bench](#) and [Making the Right Moves - Chapter 4](#) from HHMI and BWF.

[Behavioral Based Interviewing](#), an in-depth course in interviewing.

[Introduction to HR Concepts: What PIs Need to Know](#), an introductory course in employment law, addressing appropriate and legal interview questions.

MAKING A POSTDOC JOB OFFER:

[PI Guide to Offer Letter](#)

[Offer Letter Template](#)

[PI Guide to Statement of Training and Resources](#)

[Statement of Training and Resources Template](#)

POLICIES AND GUIDELINES FOR POSTDOCS:

[Policies and Guidelines for Postdoctoral Fellows](#) - DRAFT (send comments to BWHOPRC@partners.org)

PREPARING FOR ARRIVAL:

Once you have a prospective candidate, please direct them to the ORC webpage for [Prospective Postdocs](#).

[BWH Professional Staff New Hire Packet](#)

[Postdoc Arrival Checklist](#)

New Research Fellow Resource Guide - coming soon

FRESH Start Guide - coming soon

FINDING STUDENTS FOR THE LAB:

[Northeastern University Co-op Students](#)

[Center for International Career Development](#)

[British Universities North American Club \(BUNAC\)](#)

MANAGING YOUR STAFF:

[Introduction to HR Concepts: What PIs Need to Know](#), an introductory course in performance management and documentation.

PREPARING FOR POSTDOC DEPARTURE:

Once it has been determined that a postdoc is leaving BWH, please direct them to the OPRC webpage for [Departing Postdocs](#)

[Postdoc Departure Checklist](#)

GENERAL ASSISTANCE:

Contacts for assistance from HR regarding your monthly paid employees (postdocs):

- Jan Goplerud, HR Consultant, jgoplerud@partners.org or 617 582-0125
- Donelle Warner, HR Representative, dwarner2@partners.org or 617 582-0158 (employee relations and policy questions)
- Angela Carter, Benefits Specialist, acarter1@partners.org or 617 724-9357 (T, We, Th), 617 525-7637 (M,F) (employee benefits questions)

REVIEWING APPLICANTS: *Research on Bias and Assumptions*

We all like to think that we are objective scholars who judge people based entirely on their experience and achievements, but copious research shows that every one of us brings a lifetime of experience and cultural history that shapes the review process.

The results from controlled studies in which people were asked to make judgments about subjects demonstrate the potentially prejudicial nature of the many implicit or unconscious assumptions we can make. Examples range from physical and social expectations or assumptions to those that have a clear connection to hiring, even for faculty positions.

It is important to note that in most of these studies, the gender of the evaluator was not significant, indicating that both men and women share and apply the same assumptions about gender. Recognizing biases and other influences not related to the quality of candidates can help reduce their impact on your search and review of candidates. Spending sufficient time on evaluation can also reduce the influence of assumption.

“When assumptions are “that cultural, racial, ethnic, and gender biases are simply nonexistent [in] screening and evaluation processes”, there is grave danger that minority and female candidates will be rejected.”

Caroline S.V. Turner

7 Ways to Reduce Bias and Assumptions of Applicants:

- Learn about research on biases and assumptions
- Discuss research on biases and assumptions and consciously strive to minimize their influence on your evaluation of candidates.
- Develop criteria for evaluating candidates and apply them consistently to all applicants.
- Spend sufficient time evaluating each applicant (15-20 minutes).
- Evaluate each candidate’s entire application; don’t depend too heavily on only one element such as the letters of recommendation, or the prestige of the degree-granting institution or post-doctoral program.
- Be able to defend every decision for rejecting or retaining a candidate.
- Periodically evaluate your decisions and consider whether qualified women and underrepresented minorities are included. If not, consider whether evaluation biases and assumptions are influencing your decisions.

Examples of common social assumptions or expectations

Examples of assumptions or biases that influence the evaluation of applications

Examples of assumptions or biases in academic job-related contexts

Biases and assumptions can influence your search in the following ways

References

Acknowledgements

Examples of common social assumptions or expectations:

- When shown photographs of people of the same height, evaluators overestimated the heights of male subjects and underestimated the heights of female subjects, even though a reference point, such as a doorway, was provided (Biernat et al.).
- When shown photographs of men with similar athletic abilities, evaluators rated the athletic ability of African American men higher than that of white men (Biernat et al.).
- Students asked to choose counselors from among a group of applicants of marginal qualifications more often chose white candidates than African American candidates with identical qualifications (Dovidio and Gaertner).

These studies show how generalizations that may or may not be valid can be applied to the evaluation of individuals (Bielby and Baron). In the study on height, evaluators applied the statistically accurate generalization that men are usually taller than women to their estimates of the height of individuals who did not necessarily conform to the generalization. If we can inaccurately apply generalizations to characteristics as objective and easily measured as height, what happens when the qualities we are evaluating are not as objective or as easily measured? What happens when the generalizations are not accurate?

“...as we become aware of our hypotheses, we replace our belief in a just world with a view of the world in which bias plays a role. Since this is a state of affairs we wish were otherwise, we prefer not to acknowledge it. But we can learn.”

Virginia Valian

Examples of assumptions or biases that can influence the evaluation of applications:

- When rating the quality of verbal skills as indicated by vocabulary definitions, evaluators rated the skills lower if they were told an African American provided the definitions than if they were told that a white person provided them (Biernat et al.).
- When asked to assess the contribution of skill and luck to successful performance of a task, evaluators more frequently attributed success to skill for males and to luck for females, even though males and females succeeded equally. (Deaux and Emswiller).
- Evaluators who were busy, distracted by other tasks, and under time pressure gave women lower ratings than men for the same written evaluation of job performance. Sex bias decreased when they were able to give all their time and attention to their judgments, which rarely occurs in actual work settings. This study indicates that evaluators are more likely to rely upon underlying assumptions and biases when they cannot/do not give sufficient time and attention to their evaluations (Martell).
- Evidence shows that perceived incongruities between the female gender role and leadership roles cause two types of disadvantage for women: (1) ideas about the female gender role cause women to be perceived as having less leadership ability than men and consequently diminish women's rise to leadership positions, and (2) women in leadership positions receive less favorable evaluations because they are perceived to be violating gender norms. These perceived incongruities lead to attitudes that are less positive toward female than male leaders (Eagly and Karau; Ridgeway).

Examples of assumptions or biases in academic job-related contexts:

- A study of over 300 recommendation letters for medical faculty at a large American medical school in the 1990s found that letters for female applicants differed systematically from those for males. Letters written for women were shorter, provided “minimal assurance” rather than solid recommendation, raised more doubts, and portrayed women as students and teachers while portraying men as researchers and professionals. While such differences were readily apparent, it is important to note that all letters studied were for successful candidates only (Trix and Psenka).
- In a national study, 238 academic psychologists (118 male, 120 female) evaluated a résumé randomly assigned a male or a female name. Both male and female participants gave the male applicant better evaluations for teaching, research, and service experience and both were more likely to hire the male than the female applicant. (Steinpreis, et.al.) Another study showed that the preference for males was greater when women represented a small proportion of the pool of candidates, as is typical in many academic fields (Heilman).
- A study of postdoctoral fellowships awarded by the Medical Research Council in Sweden, found that women candidates needed substantially more publications (the equivalent of 3 more papers in *Nature* or *Science*, or 20 more papers in specialty journals such as *Infection and Immunity* or *Neuroscience*) to achieve the same rating as men, unless they personally knew someone on the panel (Wenneras and Wold).

Biases and assumptions can influence your search in the following ways:

- Women and minority candidates may be subject to different expectations in areas such as numbers of publications, name recognition, or personal acquaintance with a committee member. (*Recall the example of the Swedish Medical Research Council.*)
- Candidates from institutions other than the major research universities that have trained most of our faculty may be under-valued. (*Qualified candidates from institutions such as historically black universities, four-year colleges, government, or industry, might offer innovative, diverse, and valuable perspectives on research and teaching.*)
- The work, ideas, and findings of women or minorities may be undervalued or unfairly attributed to a research director or collaborators despite contrary evidence in publications or letters of reference. (*Recall the biases seen in evaluations of written descriptions of job performance, and the attribution of success to luck rather than skill.*)
- The ability of females or minorities to run a research group, raise funds, and supervise students and staff of different gender or ethnicity may be underestimated. (*Recall social assumptions about leadership abilities.*)
- Assumptions about possible family responsibilities and their effect on the candidate's career path may negatively influence evaluation of a candidate's merit, despite evidence of productivity. (*Recall studies of the influence of generalizations on evaluation.*)
- Negative assumptions about whether female or minority candidates will "fit in" to the existing environment can influence evaluation. (*Recall students' choice of counselor.*)

Diversity of experience, age, physical ability, religion, ethnicity, race, and gender contributes to the richness of the environment for teaching and research.

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Writing a Letter of Recommendation

Addendum to

**Making the Right Moves:
A Practical Guide to Scientific Management
for Postdocs and New Faculty**

second edition

**Burroughs Wellcome Fund
Howard Hughes Medical Institute**

Making the Right Moves: A Practical Guide to Scientific Management for Postdocs and New Faculty, second edition

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WRITING A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

As a beginning independent investigator, chances are you will soon have to write a letter of recommendation on behalf of a student, a postdoc, or even a colleague. Your job as letter writer will be to describe the candidate's strengths and weaknesses as they relate to the position or program in a way that is both thoughtful and personal. A letter that falls short of this goal will be of little value to those evaluating applications and will not help the candidate get what he or she is after. So, it pays to put in the necessary effort and time to write a "good" letter. This chapter provides insights and advice from experienced investigators on how to do so. It is not meant to be prescriptive but rather to offer some suggestions from which you can pick and choose.

BEING ASKED TO WRITE A LETTER

Letters of recommendation are ubiquitous in an academic research career. If you teach one or more senior-level undergraduate courses or have undergraduate students in your laboratory, you might have to write dozens of letters a year as students become graduate-school bound or look for employment. If you do not teach undergraduates and have primarily graduate students and postdocs in your lab, you will have significantly fewer letters to write—maybe for only one or two people each year.

In addition to the people in your own lab, graduate students and postdocs in your department may ask you to write letters for them when they apply for fellowships or seek new positions. Colleagues might also ask you to write letters of recommendation on their behalf for various promotions or awards, but that may not happen too often until you are more established.

For Whom Should You Write?

As a mentor, you have an obligation to support students and postdocs in your lab in their job search and to help them find a good match for their abilities and aspirations. If they ask you to write a recommendation letter, it is customary to support them in this way. The best thing to do is to sit down with them and discuss their plans *before* they start applying for jobs. If their career goals are unrealistic, talk about what they need to do to become more competitive or help steer them

in a different direction. If you do end up writing a letter for someone in your lab for a job you don't think is a good fit, there are ways to put a positive spin on the negative (see page 6, "Writing a 'Not-So-Enthusiastic' Letter"). If people who are not part of your lab ask you to write a letter for them, it is up to you to decide whether to do so.

Reasons to Turn Someone Down

You should write a letter of recommendation only if you can honestly write a supportive letter for someone for a given position. After all, a letter of recommendation is supposed to be a tool for helping people obtain what they are after. If you don't know the candidate well enough to write a good letter, let the person know. He or she will probably ask someone else.

If you do know the candidate well but have some reservations, let the person know about your concerns, and leave it up to him or her to decide whether you should still write the letter.

PREPARATION

Read Some Sample Letters

If you have never written a letter of recommendation before, read a stack of reference letters to see what works and what doesn't. Most faculty have access to graduate student applications and the letters submitted. Junior faculty can also ask their more experienced colleagues to share "sample" letters they have written or have received from applicants (blocking out names and other personal information). The resource section of this chapter provides links to sample letters.

Collect Information

Once you know what a letter of recommendation looks like, make sure you find out as much as possible about the candidate for whom you are writing. One of the worst things you can do is to write a letter that is too generic.

TIP: When reading a sample recommendation letter, try to put yourself in the position of whoever is going to read it, keeping in mind that you could be reading the letter late at night or when you are pressed for time. Ask yourself which letters stand out and then use them as models for your own letters.

Ask for the following information:

- ◆ For people in your lab—you probably already have a current curriculum vitae (CV), but also ask for as complete a description as possible of the position or program for which the person is applying.

- ◆ For people who are not in your lab—ask for a current CV that includes the dates and locations of their training and a list of publications as well as copies of any papers that are in press or that have been submitted.
- ◆ For people who were in your lab but have since moved on—ask for a written summary of their current work, future plans, and why they are interested in the position for which you are writing the letter.
- ◆ For students who are not in your lab or department but who were in one of the classes you taught—ask for transcripts and check your class records.

Many reference writers find it helpful to meet with the person who has requested the letter of recommendation. In such a meeting you can learn about the person's long-term career goals and how his or her current research and other activities relate to these goals. Ask about the programs or positions for which letters are being requested and what the individual's preference is and why. You should also discuss the candidate's strengths and weaknesses as they relate to these positions.

TIP: Don't ask the candidate to write a draft of the letter for you. Most heads of labs say this rarely saves time and sometimes leads to a weaker letter. It is better for the candidate to provide you with all the necessary information, from which you can then pick and choose as you write your letter.

If you cannot have a face-to-face meeting, ask the candidate for a detailed written description of these issues.

Allot Sufficient Time to Write and Send the Letter

Once you have gathered the data and marked the deadline on your calendar, make sure you set aside enough time to write the letter. It can take one to two hours, sometimes longer, to craft a well-written letter for one individual. (It takes less time to tweak this initial letter for different programs or positions the same individual has applied to.)

The candidate should give you clear instructions on how and where to send the letter. Some letters have to be submitted online, some e-mailed, and others sent by snail mail.

WHAT THE LETTER SHOULD SAY

KKeep the following pointers in mind when you craft your letter.

Introduce Yourself and the Candidate

Begin the letter by describing how you know the candidate. Briefly state your own qualifications so that people who don't know you can decide whether to

trust your judgment. But don't go overboard and make the letter about yourself!

For example, "During my years of training as a postdoc and now as a faculty member, I have worked with and personally trained more than xx graduate students in laboratories at the University of Michigan, Harvard Medical School, and, currently, at Emory University. In my opinion, candidate x is among the top 5 percent of the graduate students I have known." (You may want to include students you trained as a postdoc, if you have not yet had many students in your own lab.)

Present the Candidate Truthfully but Positively

Devote several paragraphs to discussing the candidate's scientific work and personality, following the suggestions below.

Be specific. Give meaningful examples of achievements and provide stories or anecdotes that illustrate the candidate's strengths. Don't just praise by using generalities (such as "quick learner"), but say what the candidate did to give you that impression. These details will show you have a strong relationship and also bring the candidate alive on the page. If the candidate works in your laboratory, make sure the letter talks about his or her specific contributions to the lab's research.

- ◆ "Student x is the first person to successfully master in vivo imaging in my laboratory and did all the trouble-shooting calibration and testing completely independently."
- ◆ "Student x is the first student in my lab to have a first-author *Cell* paper. She contributed data for five of the figures and made an important intellectual contribution to the experimental design and to writing the discussion."
- ◆ "Candidate x's research was submitted as an abstract and was accepted for a podium presentation at the American Association for Cancer Research national meeting earlier this year. Although she is an undergraduate student, I treated candidate x in the same manner I would treat an experienced graduate student by having her prepare and present the talk independently. At the meeting, she presented the work and answered all the questions from the audience in a clear and professional manner. After the talk several scientists came up to express how impressed they were with the presentation."

TIP: Don't make the letter too short, because it will give the reader a negative impression of the candidate. Letters of recommendation should be between one and two pages.

You don't just have to describe the candidate as he or she is right now—you can discuss the development the person has undergone.

- ◆ “When candidate x came to the lab he showed promise but was not able to plan experiments effectively. Through his own hard work he has acquired this skill and has become an excellent scientist.”

Quantify and compare. Find a way to quantify the candidate's abilities, especially with respect to other scientists who have achieved success in the field and who the letter reader might know. Many letter writers rank the applicants according to their own measure of what makes a good researcher, graduate student, or technician. Depending on the position, most people rank candidates according to a combination of research strength, leadership skills, writing ability, oral communication, teaching ability, and collegiality.

- ◆ “There are currently 17 graduate students in our department and I rank candidate x as 4/17. Her bench skills are the best I have ever had in my own lab, but she still needs to develop better communication skills.”

Address the requirements of the position. Make sure the letter discusses the most important skills and personality traits needed for success in the job.

- ◆ “I understand that you are looking for a person who will be able to establish a program to study nuclear structure and architecture using imaging technologies. Candidate x has performed similar studies using fluorescent imaging in living cells. Her mastery of these experimental techniques is demonstrated by her recent first-author publications in *Journal of Cell Biology* and *Nature Cell Biology*.”

If you are writing a letter for someone applying for a position as a physician-scientist, you should comment on his or her bedside manner. For example, if you are a chief of service, comment on the candidate's clinical skills and personality and how he or she interacts with patients.

Talk about personal attributes. Does the candidate work well with others? Has she or he taught other people in the lab? Has the candidate shown motivation

“

We look for more than research accomplishments—comments on creativity, originality, independence, and leadership are usually not overhyped and mentioned specifically in letters of the very best candidates.

—Suzanne Pfeffer, Stanford University School of Medicine

”

and commitment in her or his work? Often these descriptions are what distinguish a good letter of recommendation from a great one.

Make it memorable. Put something in the letter that the reader will remember, such as an unusual anecdote, or use an unusual term to describe the candidate. This will help the application stand out from all the others.

Beware of what you leave out. Remember that what is *not* said in a reference letter can be just as important as what *is* said. If you don't mention a candidate's leadership skills or his or her ability to work well with others, for example, the letter reader will wonder why.

TIP: A final statement summarizing your enthusiasm for the candidate is often very useful in focusing the reader's attention on your conclusions and your excitement for candidate.

Express Your Willingness to Help Further

Conclude the letter by offering to be contacted should the reader need more information or have questions. Make sure to provide your phone number and perhaps the best times to reach you.

WRITING A “NOT-SO-ENTHUSIASTIC” LETTER

If you write a letter for someone about whom you have some concerns—for example, the person lacks strong leadership skills or isn't highly motivated—you can still write a generally positive letter, leaving out a mention of these qualities. This omission will send a signal to readers who will be looking for these details. A short letter will also signal that you are not overly enthusiastic about the person for this particular position. If the reviewers are interested in the candidate, they may call you for more details and you will then have the opportunity to explain your reservations.

You can also mention negative things by putting a positive spin on them. For example, if someone has not published much you can say “candidate x has taken a long time to get experiments going but now has several papers in press and I think they will make an important contribution to the field.”

TIP: If the candidate is a good scientist but better suited, say, for a faculty position at some schools and not others, some researchers handwrite that perception on top of the standard letter to those “other” schools. This way they still help the candidate obtain a faculty job without harming their reputation for good judgment.

Yet another way to make a criticism sound less damaging is to say something like “when candidate x came to the lab his writing skills were poorly developed, but he has worked hard to improve them and has made great strides in that direction.”

Terms like “room for improvement,” “has worked hard to,” and “made great progress in” are useful and help turn a negative into a positive.

WHAT THE LETTER SHOULD NOT SAY

Avoid Irrelevant Information

Letters should not mention anything that is irrelevant to doing the job, such as ethnicity, age, hobbies, marital status, and so on. A writer might want to say things like “candidate x understands how important it is to have a lab team that functions well and has organized several social events for the lab that have helped make it both productive and happy” to show that the person is social and easy to get along with. That is something that might be important to the job. In some cases, personal information may illustrate the ability to persevere and overcome adversity, qualities that are helpful in research.

But statements like “candidate x is very religious and has demonstrated religious fervor uncommon for someone his age” has no bearing on whether someone will do well in graduate school or in a job.

Personal information may be revealed if it helps explain a weakness in someone’s application. For example, sometimes there are acceptable circumstances for a gap in someone’s publication record—perhaps a medical condition or a family situation kept that person out of the lab for a period of time. It is okay to explain that in the letter of recommendation but only after discussing it with the candidate.

Another example of a personal situation that might warrant discussion would be a case in which a postdoc is not able to ask his or her advisor for a letter of recommendation because of a bad relationship. If you, as the letter writer, know about this situation, you might want to mention in the letter that “there was a personality conflict but it does not reflect on the ability of the candidate to do the job.”

Don’t Say Anything That Is Not True

Obviously, all information in a letter of recommendation should be, to the best of your knowledge, accurate. But sometimes letter writers stretch the truth to make a candidate sound better than he or she really is, thinking it is helpful.

This strategy can backfire. According to a member of a recent search committee, the head of one lab wrote letters for three applicants from his lab, and in each letter he stated that the applicant was “the best postdoc ever in my lab.” Most researchers say that the most effective letters they receive include some weakness to balance the strengths.

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You don't help the candidate by overhyping them. You should write strongly and specifically about someone who is really excellent (say how and why they are special). But it's okay to write a balanced letter, even for the top folks.

—Suzanne Pfeffer, Stanford University School of Medicine

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BE AWARE OF GENDER BIAS

Choose Your Words Wisely

Two studies have shown that there may be some differences in the choice of words used in letters for male and female scientists. Both Trix and Psenka (2003) and Schmader, Whitehead, and Wysocki (2007) found that letters for women did not contain as many “standout” adjectives—words like “superb,” “outstanding,” and “excellent”—as did letters for men. In addition, Trix and Psenka found that letters for women had more doubt-raising statements, including negative or unexplained comments.

“

If you say that Chris works well in a team—that might be interpreted differently depending on whether Chris is male or female. Exactly the same language can convey different messages because of people's antecedent beliefs about gender differences. The reader might infer that Chris the man is a good team leader or someone who can work well with a team even when he isn't a leader of it. Chris the woman, in contrast, may look as if she can't or doesn't lead. For both men and women, then, it is good to be explicit that the person is both a good team leader and can work collaboratively.”

—Virginia Valian, Hunter College

”

Test for Possible Bias

Although it is not clear what the effect of the choice of words is, it seems plausible that the words you use will affect the reader's perception of the candidate—the stronger the words, the stronger the candidate. In an exercise conducted at

the 2005 BWF-HHMI Course in Laboratory Management, course participants were asked to read two letters written by the same professor for two postdocs in his lab, one male and one female (see appendix), with similar qualifications and achievements. The professor used more specific and descriptive language, as well as more standout adjectives, for the male candidate than for the female candidate (see summary document, appendix). As a result, course participants overwhelmingly gave the male postdoc a higher ranking than the female postdoc.

TIP: Write a letter of recommendation for any candidate, male or female, and then switch all the pronouns to the opposite gender. Read the letter over and ask yourself: Does it sound odd? If it does, you should probably change the terms used.

ASKING SOMEONE TO WRITE A LETTER FOR YOU

Many letter writers also need letters written on their behalf at some point in their careers. If you are asking someone to write a letter of recommendation for you, make sure you follow these guidelines:

- ◆ Plan way ahead. If you want good letters of recommendation, you need to plan several years in advance. It is important to have established personal relationships with potential writers early on in your career. The best letters are the ones that come from people who say “I have known this person for x years.”
Try to establish strong relationships with at least half a dozen people, some of whom should be well known in your field. People who read the recommendation letter are more likely to care about the opinion of someone who has a good reputation in the field.
- ◆ Be specific. When you ask someone for a recommendation letter, be very specific about what you want.
- ◆ Prepare the writers. Once your reference has agreed to write a recommendation letter for you, a good strategy is to give the person a memo that describes the job or jobs to which you are applying and the key skills or attributes and other aspects of your background that make you well suited for the job.

Other documents you should provide, depending on how well the person writing the letter knows you, are a CV, any papers published and in press, and copies of academic transcripts. You should also provide parts of the application that you have had to write yourself, such as a personal essay of your career goals or a statement of your teaching philosophy. The letter writer can speak to these items if he or she has the complete application.

TIP: It is usually a good idea to ask people you would like as references if they feel that they can write a “positive letter” of support for you. If they say no, it is better to know it now rather than after you don’t get the job.

You may be asked to write a draft of the letter. As mentioned on page 1, many heads of laboratories say this is not a good idea. However, if you are asked to do it, do it!

Make sure you provide the writers with the instructions for submitting the letter and the deadline. If letters are to be mailed, give them postage-paid addressed

envelopes. Also provide any forms that are supposed to be submitted with the letter. (Make sure to complete as much information as possible on those forms so that the letter writer does not have to do it.)

- ◆ Meet with the writers. If possible, meet with the letter writer and go through all the information you are providing. If the writer is in a different location you can talk to him or her by phone.
- ◆ Don’t miss the deadline. Give references plenty of time to accomplish their tasks. Ideally, approach them with the request at least three weeks before the letter is due. Once you have provided all the information, remind them of the deadline and check back periodically. Reminders will not be resented.
- ◆ Don’t argue. If someone says that they do not know you well enough or don’t have the time, don’t try to convince them otherwise.

TIP: If you get the position, make sure that the reference writer knows it and then thank the person formally with a note. Who knows, there may come a time when you will want to ask this person for a recommendation letter again!

Like many other tasks new faculty have to perform, writing letters of recommendation becomes easier with practice. But regardless of how many letters you write, each letter requires time and effort. Take the job seriously. Although a poorly written letter is not going to sink a career, a well-written one can make an application stand out from all the others.

RESOURCES

The Survival Skills and Ethics Program at the University of Pittsburgh provides several useful resources for graduate students, postdocs, and new faculty, including a sample letter of recommendation.

See <http://www-survival.pitt.edu/library/documents.asp>.

Cynthia Verba, director of fellowships for the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University, has written a useful article with several sample letters for teaching fellows (or tutors) writing letters of recommendation for their students at

<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/Verba-recs.html>.

Michel Ernst at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has written several tips as well as a book for writing letters of recommendation at

<http://people.csail.mit.edu/mernst/advice/write-recommendation.html>.

Ira Mellman, former cell biology department head at Yale University and currently a scientist at Genentech, wrote two articles for the *American Society of Cell Biology Newsletter*:

“How to write an effective letter of recommendation”

<http://www.ascb.org/files/0505wicb.pdf>

and

“How to read a letter of recommendation”

<http://www.ascb.org/files/0507wicb.pdf>.

The Social Psychology Network provides suggestions and pointers for students on how to go about obtaining a letter of recommendation at

<http://www.socialpsychology.org/rectips.htm>.

For information about how gender affects science careers, including reference letters, see Virginia Valian’s website at <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/gendertutorial/> and <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/genderequity/>.

Two studies have looked at how gender bias affects how letters of recommendation are written:

Trix, Frances, and Carolyn Psenka. “Exploring the Color of Glass: Letters of Recommendation for Female and Male Medical Faculty.” *Discourse & Society* 14(2):191–220 (2003).

Schmader, Toni, Jessica Whitehead, and Vicki H. Wysocki. A Linguistic Comparison of Letters of Recommendation for Male and Female Chemistry and Biochemistry Job Applicants. *Sex Roles* 57:509–514 (2007).

Two articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* observe that letters of recommendation are often overhyped and discuss some reasons why that might be:

Schneider, Alison. Why You Can't Trust Letters of Recommendation. *Chronicle of Higher Education* 46(43): (June 30, 2000).

McCloskey, Deidre. The Random Insanity of Letters of Recommendation. *Chronicle of Higher Education* 48(25): (March 1, 2002).

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APPENDIX

Recommendation Letters for Dr. Stephen Hoffmann and Dr. Susan Hoffmann

This appendix contains two sample letters of recommendation written for two fictitious postdoctoral fellows from the same lab—the first one for a male postdoc, Dr. Stephen Hoffman, and the second one for a female postdoc, Dr. Susan Hoffman. Both letters were written by the same person, a “Distinguished Professor Corvallis,” who used different language to describe the two candidates. The appendix also contains a side-by-side comparison of the terms used to describe the two candidates.

The letters were used in an exercise at the 2005 Course in Scientific Management organized by the Burroughs Wellcome Fund and Howard Hughes Medical Institute conducted by Jo Handelsman, Christine Pfund, Sarah Miller Lauffer, and Christine Pribbenow from the Wisconsin Program for Scientific Teaching. The exercise was meant to illustrate how the language used in a reference letter can give different impressions of two candidates with very similar qualifications. As shown by a number of studies, letter writers tend to use stronger terms for male candidates than for female candidates.

Letter for Stephen Hoffmann

Search and Screen Committee
 Department of Bacteriology
 University of Cambridge
 Boston, MA 01237

Dear Members of the Search Committee,

It is my pleasure to recommend Dr. Stephen Hoffmann for the position of Assistant Professor in your department. Stephen completed his Ph.D. in my lab and is one of the most outstanding researchers to emerge from my lab. I recommend him to you highly.

In my lab Dr. Hoffmann cloned and characterized the *gliD* gene from *Cytophaga johnsoniae*. He made the intriguing discovery that the GliD protein is required for gliding behavior in *Cytophaga* and its human homologue is associated with a highly metastatic form of breast cancer. This observation suggests that there may be common features in bacterial gliding motility and mobility of human tumor cells. Dr. Hoffmann initiated a highly productive collaboration with Professor David Whitely that led to the crystallization and high resolution structure of the GliD protein. Dr. Hoffmann brought that work to fruition in a *PNAS* paper, on which he is the senior author. In addition to the *PNAS* paper, Dr. Hoffmann published three other papers from his thesis, which attest to his hard work, biological insight, and outstanding writing skills. Dr. Hoffmann proved himself an outstanding researcher and valued colleague.

Dr. Hoffmann continued to produce original research as a postdoc in Jim Wooley's lab working on *Bacillus subtilis* development. Once again, Dr. Hoffmann discovered a gene that is found in both prokaryotes and eukaryotes, this time in a search for sporulation genes in *B. subtilis*. He identified a new sporulation gene, designated *spoW*, which has a mammalian homologue that appears to be associated with lymphocyte differentiation and maturation. Although that work is not yet published, it has a bright future. The project was technically challenging, but Dr. Hoffmann has surmounted all of the obstacles and a genetic and biochemical analysis of the *spoW* allele and its product will be ready for publication soon. Given Dr. Hoffmann's past record in publishing research, I have no doubt that this work will be published in a top-tier journal.

Dr. Hoffmann proved himself to be a capable mentor and teacher. He has supervised three undergraduate researchers. He is clearly able to transmit his passion and talent for research to young scientists. Similarly, his classroom teaching was met with rave reviews. Dr. Hoffmann is one of my few colleagues to whom I will entrust my class when I travel. Dr. Hoffmann was also a terrific citizen and a leader in my lab. He handled responsibility well, was resourceful, and took initiative to maintain equipment and ensure that safety standards were met. He took on many of the responsibilities of a faculty member and excelled in everything he did.

In short, I give Stephen my highest recommendation. He is one of my finest colleagues—an outstanding researcher and talented teacher. He has demonstrated an uncanny ability to unmask genes that play parallel roles in bacteria and mammals, and I expect him to be one of the leading researchers in his field. He would be a good catch for any department and I urge you to consider his candidacy seriously.

Sincerely,

Theodore Corvallis
 Distinguished University Professor

Rating

- 1 = not interested in this one
- 2 = keep this one in the pool, but I expect better candidates in the pool
- 3 = very strong candidate, but have a few concerns
- 4 = outstanding candidate; definitely move to next stage
- 5 = superlative candidate; better snatch this one before Stanford does!

Letter for Susan Hoffmann

Search and Screen Committee
 Department of Bacteriology
 University of Cambridge
 Boston, MA 01237

Dear Members of the Search Committee,

It is my pleasure to recommend Dr. Susan Hoffmann for the position of Assistant Professor in your department. Susan was my graduate student and ranks among my very best students. I recommend her to you highly.

As a student, Susan cloned and characterized the *gliD* gene from *Cytophaga johnsoniae*. She made the intriguing discovery that the GliD protein is required for gliding behavior in *Cytophaga* and its human homologue is associated with a highly metastatic form of breast cancer. This observation suggests that there may be features in common between bacterial gliding motility and mobility of human tumor cells. A highly productive collaboration with Professor David Whitely led to the crystallization and high resolution structure of the GliD protein. That work was published in a *PNAS* paper, on which Susan is a coauthor. In addition to the *PNAS* paper, Susan published three other papers from her thesis, which attest to her hard work, biological insight, and outstanding writing skills. Her high productivity as a graduate student is particularly remarkable because she had two children while in graduate school and her husband is a resident in emergency room medicine.

Susan continued her record of excellent work as a postdoctoral student in Jim Wooley's lab working on *Bacillus subtilis* development. Once again, Susan discovered a gene that is found in both prokaryotes and eukaryotes, this time in a search for sporulation genes in *B. subtilis*. She identified a new sporulation gene, designated *spoW*, which has a mammalian homologue that appears to be associated with lymphocyte differentiation and maturation. Susan has been slow to publish this work and therefore has no publications from her three-year postdoctoral study. No doubt her family responsibilities have contributed to this delay.

Susan proved herself an able mentor and a sterling classroom teacher. She has three undergraduate researchers who have all coauthored publications, which is indicative of the excellent mentorship they received from Susan. Similarly, her classroom teaching was met with rave reviews. Of all of my students, I felt the most comfortable asking Susan to cover my classes for me when I was out of town because I knew she would do a great job. Susan was also a cooperative and reliable lab citizen. She handled responsibility well and conscientiously followed through on all that was asked of her to maintain equipment and ensure that safety standards were met.

In short, I give Susan my highest recommendation. She is one of the best students I have seen and is a talented teacher and mentor. She has an uncanny ability to unmask genes that play parallel roles in bacteria and mammals, and I expect her to continue to be as productive and creative as she was as a student in my lab. She would be a good catch for any department and I urge you to consider her candidacy seriously.

Sincerely,

Theodore Corvallis
 Distinguished University Professor

Rating

- 1 = not interested in this one
- 2 = keep this one in the pool, but I expect better candidates in the pool
- 3 = very strong candidate, but have a few concerns
- 4 = outstanding candidate; definitely move to next stage
- 5 = superlative candidate; better snatch this one before Stanford does!

Side-by-Side Comparison of the Letters

Here is a side-by-side comparison of the terms used in each letter (in each case, the first bullet is how Corvallis describes Stephen Hoffman and the second bullet, in italics, is how he describes Susan Hoffmann):

First paragraph:

- ◆ Stephen completed his Ph.D. in my lab and is one of the most outstanding researchers to emerge from my lab.
- ◆ *Susan was my graduate student and ranks among my very best students.*

Second paragraph:

- ◆ In my lab, Dr. Hoffman
- ◆ *As a student, Susan*

- ◆ Dr. Hoffman initiated
- ◆ ...

- ◆ Dr. Hoffman brought that work to fruition
- ◆ ...

- ◆ senior author
- ◆ *coauthor*

- ◆ Dr. Hoffman proved himself an outstanding researcher and valued colleague.
- ◆ *Her high productivity as a graduate student is particularly remarkable because she had two children while in graduate school and her husband is a resident in emergency room medicine.*

Third paragraph:

- ◆ Dr. Hoffman continued to produce original research as a postdoc.
- ◆ *Susan continued her record of excellent work as a postdoctoral student.*

- ◆ Although that work is not yet published, it has a bright future. The project was technically challenging, but Dr. Hoffman has surmounted all of the obstacles and a genetic and biochemical analysis of the *spoW* allele and its product will be ready for publication soon. Given Dr. Hoffman's past record in publishing research, I have no doubt that his work will be published in a top-tier journal.
- ◆ *Susan has been slow to publish this work and therefore has no publications from her three-year postdoctoral study. No doubt her family responsibilities have contributed to this delay.*

Fourth paragraph:

- ◆ a capable mentor and teacher
- ◆ *an able mentor and a sterling classroom teacher*
- ◆ He has supervised three undergraduate researchers. He is clearly able to transmit his passion and talent for research to young scientists.
- ◆ *She has three undergraduate researchers who have all coauthored publications, which is indicative of the excellent mentorship they received from Susan.*
- ◆ Dr. Hoffman is one of my few colleagues to whom I will entrust my class when I travel.
- ◆ *Of all of my students, I felt the most comfortable asking Susan to cover my classes for me when I was out of town because I knew she would do a great job*
- ◆ Dr. Hoffman was also a terrific citizen and a leader in my lab.
- ◆ *Susan was also a cooperative and reliable lab citizen.*
- ◆ He ... was resourceful, and took initiative to maintain equipment and ensure that safety standards were met. He took on many of the responsibilities of a faculty member and excelled in everything he did.
- ◆ *She ... conscientiously followed through on all that was asked of her to maintain equipment and ensure that all safety standards were met.*

Fifth paragraph:

- ◆ He is one of my finest colleagues—an outstanding researcher and talented teacher.
- ◆ *She is one of the best students I have seen and is a talented teacher and mentor.*
- ◆ He has demonstrated an uncanny ability ...
- ◆ *She has an uncanny ability ...*
- ◆ I expect him to be one of the leading researchers in his field.
- ◆ *I expect her to continue to be as productive and creative as she was as a student in my lab.*