Canadian Cancer Society

Guidance Document
CCS Awards for Excellence Nominators

Applicants to the Canadian Cancer Society's Awards for Excellence competition require one nomination letter and two letters of reference as part of their full application. Letters must be received no later than December 2, 2026 (5:00 p.m. ET) in order for the application to be considered. Please note that applicants cannot view reference letters attached to their submission.

1. For the Lifetime Contribution, Robert L. Noble, O. Harold Warwick, Bernard and Francine Dorval, and William E. Rawls Prizes

Each nomination package must be uploaded in EGrAMS by the nominator as one PDF file not to exceed 5 Mb, including the following:

- **A nomination letter** from an appropriate authority from the nominee's host institution (*nominator*)
- **A reference letter** from an individual from *outside* of the host institution who can attest to the impact of the nominee's research/contributions (*referee*)
    - *For the **Lifetime Contribution** award* - this letter may include testimonials from researchers who have benefitted from the nominee's contributions in order to support statements made by the referee. Testimonials must be cohesively presented (i.e. avoid snippets/blurbs) and will help present a complete picture of the nominees and the impact of their accomplishments.
- **A reference letter** from a qualified expert in the nominee's field who can attest to the international significance and impact of the nominee's research program/contributions (*referee*)
    - *For senior-level prizes (Noble and Warwick) and Lifetime Contribution award* – at least one of the reference letters must be from a recognized international authority in the candidate's field who does not reside in Canada.

The nomination letter (maximum 4 pages) and reference letters (maximum 2 pages each) must be submitted in PDF format, presented on official letterhead, dated and signed. Nominators and referees are to include a brief description of their position as well as their professional relationship with the applicant to put their recommendations into context.

The three (3) letters should collectively contain the following information:

- A detailed description of the candidate's contributions to cancer/cancer research in Canada and internationally where relevant.
- If the candidate's research/contributions have had a direct impact on the treatment or management of cancer, indicate the actual or potential benefits to the Canadian public, and internationally where applicable.
- The candidate's research productivity in terms of scholarly contributions, research funding track record and forged collaborations in Canada and internationally where applicable. Highlight any publications in the individual's CV which you believe are particularly noteworthy.
- Service to the research community and/or the Canadian Cancer Society and/or evidence of outreach efforts to the general public.
- Regarding consideration of circumstances which may have impacted the nominee's career progression (see our website for evaluation criteria) – where possible, any barriers should be explained.

- For **early career investigators**:
    - The nominator's letter should include the start date of the candidate's first independent academic career (contact CCS research staff for questions regarding eligibility).

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- For the **Lifetime Contribution** award:
    - The nominator's letter should include a description of the candidate's demonstrated commitment to training and mentorship. An exhaustive list of trainees is not necessary, but it would be insightful to get a sense of the career paths pursued by the trainees (e.g., academia, industry, and others) and how the mentorship and guidance provided by the candidate was instrumental to their success.
    - The nominator's letter must clearly articulate what the nominee's legacy is/will be to the Canadian cancer research community.

2. **For the Inclusive Excellence Prize**

Each nomination package must be uploaded in EGrAMS by the nominator and must include:

1. **One nomination letter** from an individual who has firsthand knowledge of the nominee's efforts in the advancement of equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility in the cancer research ecosystem in Canada (*nominator*).
2. **Two reference letters** from individuals who have directly observed or benefitted from the nominee's leadership in fostering inclusive excellence (*referees*).

Note: one or more of the letters may include testimonials from individuals whose career trajectories, research programs, etc. have been impacted directly by the efforts of the individual in order to support the statements made by the referee. Testimonials must be cohesively presented (i.e. avoid snippets/blurbs) and will help present a complete picture of the nominee and what they have accomplished.

The nomination letter (maximum 4 pages) and reference letters (maximum 2 pages each) must be submitted in PDF format, presented on official letterhead (as applicable), dated and signed. Nominators and referees are to include a brief description of their position as well as their professional relationship with the applicant to put their recommendations into context.

The three (3) letters should collectively contain the following information:

- A detailed description of the candidate's efforts/actions towards fostering inclusive excellence in Canada's cancer research ecosystem.
- A detailed account of the specific impact(s) on Canada's cancer research ecosystem.
- Evidence (if applicable) that the candidate is viewed as an equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility leader in Canada.
- Note that the nominee does not have to be specifically a cancer (or equity, diversity, and inclusion) researcher, but if their program of research focuses on equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility this should be highlighted.

Note that personal identifiers of individuals impacted by the candidate's efforts and contributions towards equitable capacity building should not be disclosed. CCS is looking for the strategies and approaches nominees have employed in their efforts to advance and foster inclusive excellence in Canada's research ecosystem.

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3. Renominations

We encourage renominations where eligible. For renominations, nominees must complete a new nomination form in EGrAMS, indicate that the submission is a renomination, and provide an updated CV. Nomination dossiers may be updated as desired to reflect new contributions, but CCS will also accept letters provided within the past 3 years. Nominators must re-upload, re-date, and re-sign the nomination dossier in EGrAMS. Please ensure that renominations for nominees to the early career investigator awards remain eligible within the 10-year award window.

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Best Practices for Writing Letters – Nominator/Referee

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).[1-5] 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.[1,6,7] 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 reported,[8] 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 sources[1-7,9] for nominators and referees to carefully consider when drafting their letters:

Focus comments on the candidate's research skills and academic (and other award-related) achievements rather than their interpersonal attributes. Address the points requested and exclude personal information not relevant to the nomination.

- 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 candidate with equivalent credentials, but of a different demographic background.
- Refer to the candidate'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://eswn-online.org/guide-to-avoid-racial-bias-in-reference-letter-writing/

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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. Madera, J. et al. Gender and letters of recommendation for academia: agentic and communal differences. Journal of Applied Psychology. (2009).
5. Trix, F. & Psenka, C. Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty. Discourse & Society. (2003).
6. Grimm, L., et al. Gender and Racial Bias in Radiology Residency Letters of Recommendation. Journal of the American College of Radiology. (2020).
7. Houser, G. & Lemmons, K. Implicit bias in letters of recommendation for an undergraduate research internship. Journal of Further and Higher Education. (2018).
8. 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).
9. Schmader, T. et al. A Linguistic Comparison of Letters of Recommendation for Male and Female Chemistry and Biochemistry Job Applicants. Sex Roles. (2007).