Canadian Cancer Society

Guidance Document for CCS Research Training Award Applicant Referees

Applicants to the Canadian Cancer Society's Research Training Awards master's, doctoral, and postdoctoral competitions require a letter of reference from their direct supervisor as part of their full application.

The letter must be received by the application deadline listed in the relevant Request for Applications for the application to be considered complete. Please note that applicants cannot view reference letters attached to their submission. **Letters exceeding the limit stipulated will be truncated**.

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1. Letter of reference

The **letter of reference** from the supervisor must be:

- A maximum of 2 pages
- Submitted in PDF format
- Presented on official letterhead
- Dated and signed

Only one letter will be accepted. In the case of co-supervision, the letter can be co-signed by both supervisors, but the page limit remains the same.

The letter of reference must include:

- ✓ A brief description of the referee's credentials and professional relationship with the applicant.
- ✓ An assessment of the applicant's suitability for this award and potential benefit from the training opportunity.
- ✓ The supervisor's assessment of the proposed work's potential to contribute to cancer research.
- ✓ Confirmation that any required certificates or authorizations relevant to the project, such as (Health Canada approvals, human embryonic stem cell involvement. or research ethics board approvals) are acquired or in process, including strategies to mitigate potential delays.
- ✓ Any perceived barriers and mitigating strategies to the success of the applicant's project and program.
- ✓ How the supervisor will mentor and support the applicant's overall growth and development during the award.
- ✓ How the supervisor will support the applicant's learning and development in patient engagement and knowledge sharing, which are core components of the CCS IGNITE program for RTA awardees.
- ✓ How the training environment will support the applicant's learning and success including equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) principles and practices applied by the supervisor and within the research environment.
- ✓ If applicable (if the trainee has expressed interest in continuing with a PhD after their master's degree), a description of if/how the supervisor will support this transition.

2. Best practices for writing letters of reference

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) [1,2,3,6,8]. 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 racialized minority groups, despite similar credentials to racial majority applicants [1,4,5]. 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[9], 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 suggested practices and resources from various sources[1-8] for referees to carefully consider when drafting their letters of recommendation:

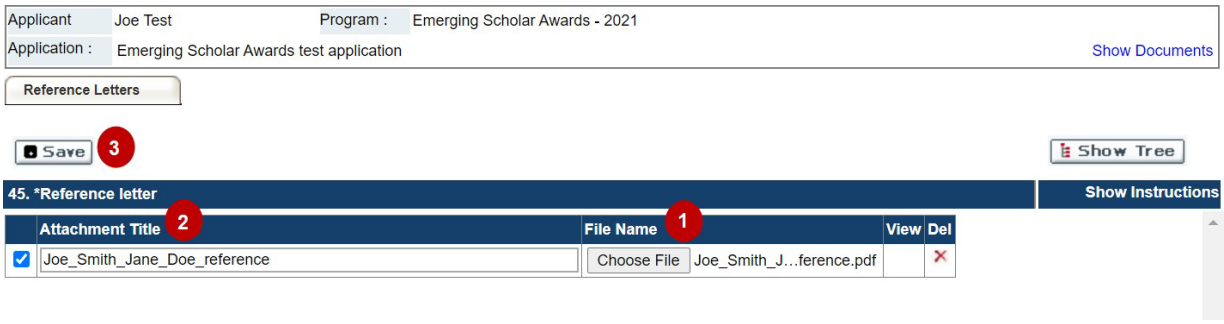
- Focus comments on how the applicant's experience supports their potential for impact on cancer research and success in their chosen area of study. Consider how your own biases and privileges/disadvantages may influence your choice of terminology.
- Carefully consider the choice of words, tone, and 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 applicant with equivalent credentials, but of a different demographic background.
- Refer to the applicant's formal title and surname rather than their first name.
- Avoid ambiguity and provide concrete examples when possible.

3. 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
- Avoiding Bias in Recommendation Letters: https://crf.georgetown.edu/avoiding-bias-in-recommendation-letters/
- 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://eswnonline.org/guide-to-avoid-racial-bias-in-reference-letter-writing/

4. Instructions on submitting letters of reference

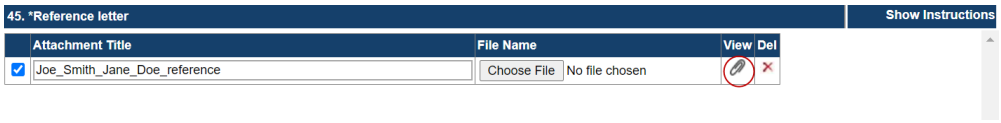
Access the website link included in your email notification. This page will be displayed:



1. Click **Choose File** to upload your letter.
2. In the **Attachment Title** field, provide a title for the letter you are uploading. Use the following naming convention: applicant-name_your-name_reference e.g. *joe-smith_jane-doe_reference*
3. Click the **Save** button

Best practice tip: Check that your letter has been uploaded.

To confirm that your letter has been successfully uploaded, click the paperclip:



Troubleshooting tip: URL does not work.

If the website address included in your email is not taking you to the page shown in the illustration above, this may be due to the URL being broken into two lines in your email display. Ensure that you are copying the complete website link into your browser.

If you have any questions regarding this process, please contact egrams@cancer.ca or research@cancer.ca.

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