



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 one letter of reference from the direct supervisor and a statement or video from a **community member or representative** (described below) as part of their full application.

Letters must be received by the application deadline listed in the RFA for the application to be considered. Please note that applicants cannot view reference letters or statements/videos 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:

- 2 pages maximum
- PDF format
- Presented on official letterhead
- Dated and signed

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

The letter of reference should include:

- A brief description of the reference's credentials as well as their professional relationship with the applicant.
- Responsibilities of the supervisor (i.e., how the supervisor will foster growth).
- A description of all critical certificates/authorizations required for the project, such as Health Canada Approvals, human Embryonic Stem Cell involvement or research ethics board approvals, and mitigation strategies for delays.
- How the training environment is supportive of learning and success including equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) principles and practices applied by the supervisor and in the training environment.
- How patient (or community) engagement is incorporated within the research team or how this will be put in place during the award, and how the trainee will be involved in the patient (or community) engagement.
- Any perceived barriers and mitigating strategies to the success of the applicant's project and program.
- Their overall assessment of the applicant's suitability for the award.
- 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. Statement of support:

The statement should be from an individual with insight into the trainee's research or clinical focus, and/or their connection with the cancer community or specific underserved communities relevant to the research proposed. This is **not** a formal reference letter but an opportunity for **someone outside of academia** to express their support for the applicant and their application (see instructions below).

- If submitted in **writing**, the statement of support (from one of the two categories described below) should be **1 page maximum**.
- If submitted via **video**, the statement of support should be **3 minutes maximum**, with the link to the video placed into a PDF that is uploaded in the system.

The statement of support can come from one of the two following categories:

a. **Person Affected by Cancer:**

A statement from an individual personally affected by cancer, such as a patient, survivor, or caregiver, who can provide insight into the applicant's research focus and its relevance to the cancer community.

If the applicant and the research host team are not currently involved with patient partners, this statement could be from someone representing an organization the applicant has engaged with or plans to collaborate with if successful for this award, as described for option b. In this context, the team is encouraged to consult the following resources for [patient engagement](#).

b. **Representative of a community or from an organization:**

A statement from a representative of an organization or non-profit that works with cancer-affected or underserved communities that is aligned with the focus of the applicant's research. This can include organizations focused on cancer research, treatment, and/or care, or underserved community engagement that the applicant has collaborated with or plans to work with.

**For Indigenous applicants** (First Nations, Inuit, or Métis), a letter from a community member (e.g. an Elder) is eligible.

The person chosen to complete the statement of support will be asked to answer the following questions in their statement:

- What is your experience with cancer and/or connection to the applicant's research?
- What is the applicant's role in or connection to your (cancer) community or your organization's mission?
- From your experience with the applicant, what potential impact do you think their research may have on patients, survivors, caregivers, or community?
- If directly involved with the trainee's research, what does (or what will) your role entail?
- Is there anything else you would like to add about the applicant, their work, and/or your current/future collaboration?

### 3. **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) <sup>1-5</sup>. 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<sup>1,6,7</sup>. 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<sup>8</sup>, 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<sup>1-7,9</sup> 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.

#### **4. 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](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/>

#### **5. Instructions on submitting letters of reference**

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

Applicant	Joe Test	Program :	Emerging Scholar Awards - 2021	<a href="#">Show Documents</a>
Application :	Emerging Scholar Awards test application			

Reference Letters



**3**

45. *Reference letter				Show Instructions
Attachment Title	File Name	View	Del	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Joe_Smith_Jane_Doe_reference	<input type="button" value="Choose File"/> Joe_Smith_J...ference.pdf			

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:

45. *Reference letter				Show Instructions
Attachment Title	File Name	View	Del	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Joe_Smith_Jane_Doe_reference	<input type="button" value="Choose File"/> No file chosen			

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 [egramscancer.ca](mailto:egramscancer.ca) or [research@cancer.ca](mailto:research@cancer.ca).

## 6. 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).