



Canadian  
Cancer  
Society

## **Guidance Document for CCS Research Training Award and Emerging Scholar Research Grant Applicant Referees**

### **Research Training Awards**

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 someone who has been affected by cancer (for example a patient, survivor, or caregiver) as part of their full application.

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

**Note that letters exceeding the limit stipulated will be truncated.**

The **letter of reference** from the supervisor must be a **maximum of 2 pages** in length, in PDF format, presented on official letterhead, dated and signed. Referees are to include a brief description of their credentials as well as their professional relationship with the applicant.

The reference letter should detail the following:

- responsibilities of the supervisor (i.e., how the supervisor will foster growth)
- 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
- 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

The **statement / video of support** from someone who has been affected by cancer (for example a patient, survivor, or caregiver) is expected to be a **maximum of 1 page in length** if submitting a statement in writing. If submitting a video, the video should be 3min maximum, with the link to the video placed into a PDF and the PDF uploaded.

The statement from the person affected by cancer should be from an individual with insight into the trainee's research or clinical focus, and/or their connection with the cancer community. This is **not** a formal reference letter but an opportunity for someone

outside of academia with an experience of cancer to support the applicant's application (see instructions below).

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

The person affected by cancer 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?
- From your experience with the applicant, what potential impact do you think their research may have on patients, caregivers, or community?
- If directly involved with the trainee's research, what does your role entail?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

### **Emerging Scholar Research Grants**

Applicants to the Canadian Cancer Society's [Emerging Scholar Research Grants](#) competition require 3 letters of reference as part of their full application:

- One of the referees must be a former supervisor
- One from someone who has been affected by cancer (for example a patient, survivor, or caregiver) or, if relevant, a community member affiliated with the applicant's research program
- One of the two academic letters is from any referee who is not affiliated with the applicant's host institution.

Letters must be received by the application deadline listed in the RFA in order for the application to be considered. Please note that applicants cannot view reference letters attached to their submission.

The letter of reference must be a maximum of 2 pages in length, in PDF format, presented on official letterhead, dated and signed. Referees are to include a brief description of their credentials as well as their professional relationship with the applicant to put their recommendations into context. References from a patient partner or community member do not require official letterhead but should describe the referee's role and the referee's and applicant's professional relationship.

### **Note that letters exceeding the limit stipulated will be truncated.**

The letters should collectively address the following information regarding the applicant:

- Potential to become a leader in cancer research in Canada and internationally
- Commitment to cancer research
- Progress towards research independence

- Research productivity
- Ability to forge collaborations with other researchers
- Evidence of engagement with patient partners and other stakeholders in the applicant's research program
- The impact that receiving this grant would have on the applicant's career trajectory (in the author's opinion)
- The mentorship approach of the applicant, including the applicant's consideration of equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility principles within their research program

### **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>1,2,3,6,8</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>1,4,5</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>9</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>1-8</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.

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/>

## 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).

## 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	
Application :	Emerging Scholar Awards test application			<a href="#">Show Documents</a>
Reference Letters				
Save 3		Show Tree		
45. *Reference letter				<a href="#">Show Instructions</a>
	Attachment Title 2	File Name 1	View	Del
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Joe_Smith_Jane_Doe_reference	Choose File Joe_Smith_J...ference.pdf		X

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				<a href="#">Show Instructions</a>
	Attachment Title	File Name	View	Del
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Joe_Smith_Jane_Doe_reference	Choose File No file chosen		X

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