

Writing Recommendation Letters

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Pathology & Immunology Office of Faculty Development

July 2020

Letters of Reference (LOR) Workshop Agenda

- Different kinds of LORs
- When to say yes & when to say no
- LOR formatting and content
- Avoiding gender bias & other tips



Types of LORs

- Job reference (first job or new job)
 - Often your trainees (post-docs, grad students, fellows, summer students)
- Promotion
 - Trainees
 - Professional colleagues
 - Strangers
- Awards
 - Usually people you know well but not always
- School (Medical, Graduate, Veterinary)
 - Usually people you know well



Saying Yes to Writing LORs

- LORs are time consuming
- Review CV **before** agreeing to write LOR
- If you have questions, reach out to requester
- Be truthful, but positive
- Say no, if you do not feel comfortable
Your own reputation is at stake
- Identify any conflicts of interest





“Are all of these letters of recommendation from your mother?”

Before starting your LOR

- Job reference
 - Review job description
 - Talk to the candidate
 - What do they want to highlight?
 - What makes them unique?
 - Why are they a perfect candidate?
 - Their goals & interests
 - Things that need explaining
- Promotion
 - University promotion criteria
 - Personal statement
 - Other information about the institution
 - Scopus or Google scholar for stats on candidate
- Awards
 - Review the description
 - Previous recipients



Opening Paragraph

- To make letter easy to read, highlight candidate's **Full Name**
- List to what the letter is in reference
 - (job application, promotion, award)
- Briefly describe yourself & how (how long) you've known the candidate
- Set the stage for what you are about to tell them

Job Reference Example 1st Paragraph

David Expert, PhD, D(ABCC)
Chief Scientific Officer
Medical Director, Core Laboratory
Clinical Professor of Pathology, University of Puerto Rico
Reference Laboratories

June 13, 2020

Dear Dr. Expert:

It is a pleasure for me to write this letter in support of **Dr. Robert Scholar** for the Medical Director-Clinical Trials and Research at Reference Laboratories. I am a professor of Pathology and Immunology and Obstetrics and Gynecology at Washington University School of Medicine. I have known Dr. Scholar for over 20 years since he came to Washington University to begin his postdoctoral fellowship in Clinical Chemistry. Dr. Scholar is an ideal candidate for this position.

After finishing our program, Dr Scholar went to the University of Texas Southwestern where he was Assistant Professor and Associate Director- Parkland Medical Hospital laboratory. In 2004 Dr. Scholar returned to Washington University to become Research Assistant Professor and

Promotion Example 1st Paragraph

Allen Expert, PhD
Chair, Peer Review Committee
Division Chair, Cellular and Molecular Pathogenesis
Department of Pathology
University X

May 13, 2020

Dear Dr. Expert:

I am writing this letter on behalf of **Dr. Jessie Scholar, PhD** in support of her promotion to Professor of Pathology at Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine. I am a Professor of Pathology and Immunology and Obstetrics and Gynecology at Washington University School of Medicine. I co-direct our Commission on Accreditation in Clinical Chemistry (CoMACC) Approved Clinical Chemistry Fellowship. I have known Dr. Scholar for approximately 10 years through her involvement in the American Association for Clinical Chemistry (AACC). I appreciate this opportunity to review and highlight her accomplishments.

Award Example 1st Paragraph

AACC Awards Committee
900 Seventh Street, NW Suite 400
Washington, DC 20001

December 21, 2019

Dear Awards Committee:

It is with great pleasure that I nominate **Dr. Steven Expert** for **the AACC Outstanding Scientific Achievements by a Young Investigator Award**. He was born on November 9, 1985, and thus will not have reached the age of 40 by January 1, 2020. I have known Dr. Expert since 2013 when he began the Clinical Chemistry training program at Washington University. Dr. Expert was one of the most outstanding fellows I have had the opportunity to work with.

Components of a Good LOR

- Body paragraphs
 - Focus on research, clinical, and/or educational expertise
 - Highlight achievements in context of requirements
 - Focus on accomplishments not effort
 - Show, don't tell. Use examples to illustrate professional attributes, technical abilities, character strengths
- Summary
 - Brief
 - Language to indicate level of support
 - Indicate they may reach out if they have questions

- Tell them what you're going to tell them
 - Tell them
 - Tell them what you told them

Job Reference

- Middle paragraphs
 - Address the job description
 - Ability for independence
 - Often ask about managerial & leadership skills
 - Quantify: #of calls, # of publications, # of projects
 - “This candidate ranks in the top XX% of all fellows I have trained.”
 - Conferences= teaching
 - Messages the candidate wants you to relay
 - Anything relative that is not on the CV
- Closing paragraph
 - Summarize why this is a good, great, excellent candidate
 - You should leave them with a sense of how you feel about this candidate





Promotion

- Middle paragraphs
 - *Address the invitation letter & University requirements*
 - Academic positions usually Research, Teaching, & Clinical Service (if applicable)
 - CEP and/or personal statement key for clinical achievements
 - Ability for independence KEY
 - Gaining national/international recognition
 - Contributing to the mission of the University
 - Quantify: Scopus, #of 1st or last author publications, # of trainees, Citation counts, #of collaborators, #of grants, #of people supervised, etc
 - Compare to peers
- Closing paragraph
 - Summarize why this individual deserves promotion
 - Leave with a sense of how you feel about this faculty & their potential for success

Appointments and Promotions Guidelines and Requirements (**APGAR**)

- Investigator Track
- Research Track
- Clinician Track

Appointments and Promotions Guidelines and Requirements (APGAR)

- Investigator Track
 - Faculty members on the Investigator Track are involved in basic biological, biomedical, clinical, and/or educational investigation, and accomplishment in this realm is the primary basis for promotion on the Investigator Track
 - Appointment and promotion are based generally upon investigation and scholarly activities, teaching, clinical excellence (where appropriate), and service. Although all of these activities are considered, excellence in scholarly investigation is the cornerstone of a candidate's record

Appointments and Promotions Guidelines and Requirements (APGAR)

- Research Track

- Faculty on the Research Track are involved in basic biomedical investigation, clinical, and/or educational investigation and must meet a standard of excellence based upon research accomplishments.
- The primary focus of Research Track faculty is to facilitate and support the overall research mission of Washington University, rather than to develop independent programs.
- Excellence in research is the major criterion for appointment and promotion for faculty on the Research Track, although other activities may also be considered.

Appointments and Promotions Guidelines and Requirements (APGAR)

- Clinician Track
 - The Clinician Track provides a mechanism for recognizing and rewarding faculty at WUSM who excel in one or more of the areas of patient care, education, administrative and research functions that assure the delivery of excellent patient care through current practice and/or by training future clinicians
 - Essential criteria for promotion for faculty members on the Clinician Track are superior clinical skills and recognition, and involvement in the teaching mission of the Medical School

P&I Request Letter

Dear Dr. XXX,

The Department of Pathology & Immunology at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis is reviewing Dr. XXX for promotion to {rank} on the {XXX} track. This {appointment/promotion} requires an assessment of the candidate from recognized authorities in the field, so I am requesting a letter from you evaluating Dr. XX's qualifications.

We value your assessment and would appreciate you specifically commenting on the following items in your letter, to the extent that you are able:

- **Investigation and Other Scholarly Accomplishments:** evaluate the candidate's academic and scholarly activities, and reputation in {her/his} field, including regional, national, and international. Comment on the originality, quality, and impact of the work.
- **Clinical Excellence:** evaluate unique clinical expertise, referrals of challenging clinical problems, service to clinical laboratory program. Have Dr. XX's clinical accomplishments received recognition beyond the Washington University community?
- **Teaching and Education:** evaluate teaching and leadership in education, including didactic, clinical, and administrative teaching and education, curriculum development, mentorship activities, invited presentations, regional, national, or international impact
- **Service to the Medical Center, University and Community:** evaluate contributions to governance, leadership roles and activities, regional, national, and international reputation
- **Relative ranking** in the field for career stage
- **Overall assessment**

Other University Request Letter

SCHOLARSHIP

4. Dr. Scholar has selected the enclosed materials as representing his most important scholarly work. Can you comment on their originality and overall quality? How do you rank Dr. Scholar's impact on the education of medical or public health professionals or on the practice of Clinical Chemistry and Laboratory Medicine? Do you believe that he is rising toward a regional or national reputation as a leader in their field and chosen area of expertise?

ADMINISTRATIVE ACTIVITIES

5. (If candidate performs a major administrative function, ask appropriate referees). What is the importance of Dr. Scholar's role as Director of Clinical Chemistry? Have you had the opportunity to interact with him in this role? How well does he function in this capacity?

COLLABORATION AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

6. Have you collaborated with Dr. Scholar on a clinical or educational activity (e.g. guideline or program development, or research project)? Can you comment on Dr. Scholar's character and judgment as a collaborator, a colleague, and a citizen of the academic community? Have you any reason to question his professional conduct?

COMPARISON TO PEERS

7. Can you name other clinicians or educators in Dr. Scholar's field and approximate peer group and indicate where he ranks within that group?

OVERALL RECOMMENDATION

8. Considering your understanding of the requirements for this promotion, and your overall impression of Dr. Scholar, do you recommend that this promotion be approved?

We understand and greatly appreciate the effort that a thoughtful reply to these questions will

Example

Comparison to Peers

It is difficult to compare one individual to others within our field without knowing the amount of clinical service each carries, and I am reticent to do so. When I compare him to the fellows who trained in our clinical chemistry training program during 2012-2014 period, I would say he is among the most well-known and well respected.

It is difficult to compare one individual to others within the field without knowing the amount of clinical service each carries and I am reticent to do so. Dr Expert is very well respected within our profession and has proven herself as an **outstanding academician and a leader within laboratory medicine**. I must tell you that I was very impressed with her accomplishments. She would certainly be a candidate for professor on the clinical track at Washington University.

Dear Dr. Chairman:

I am writing this letter on behalf of **Elizabeth Expert, PhD** in strong support of her promotion to Professor of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, Clinician Educator Track, University of Ivy League. I am a Professor of Pathology and Immunology and Obstetrics and Gynecology at Washington University School of Medicine. I also serve as Medical Director of Core Laboratory Services at Barnes Jewish Hospital. I know Dr. Expert through our mutual involvement in the Commission on Accreditation of Clinical Chemistry (ComACC). I appreciate this opportunity to review and highlight her accomplishments.

In my estimation, Dr. Expert's scholarship clearly meets the criteria for Professor for the following reasons. First, she provides significant **clinical service** to the Hospital of University of Ivy League, Dr. Expert has built a solid translational **research** program and has a consistent publication record. Third, she provides valuable contributions to **teaching and education** within University of Pennsylvania. Finally, Dr. Expert has become a recognized **leader within the profession**.

Clinical Service

Dr. Expert provides significant service within the Hospital of University of Pennsylvania with **clinical service responsibilities that take up a substantial amount of her time**. Currently, she serves as both Medical Director of the Core Laboratory and Chief of Clinical Chemistry. In these capacities she has worked to modernize the laboratory. She led a SWOT analysis and developed a strategic plan for the laboratory. She led the laboratory to select and validate a high sensitivity mass spectrophotometer in order to perform therapeutic drug monitoring. She also led the in the selection and **implementation of total lab automation**. I can tell you from experience that this is no small task. This requires months of validation, communication with house-staff, and trouble-shooting hardware and software issues. In addition, as the laboratory continues to grow, she helped to recruit an additional faculty member to help cover clinical responsibilities. In her capacity over the Core Laboratory, she also oversees the hospital's point of care testing.

Scopus

Doudna, Jennifer A.

[View potential author matches](#)

Author ID: 7006285665 ⓘ

Affiliation(s): ⓘ

California Institute for Quantitative Biosciences, Berkeley, United States [View more](#) ▾

Other name formats: [Doudna, Jennifer A.](#) [Doudna, Jennifer](#) [Doudna, J. A.](#) [Doudna, J.](#)

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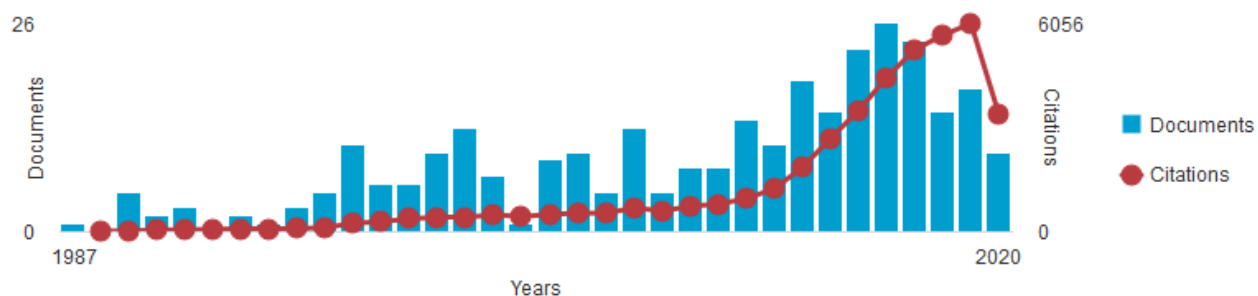
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Jennifer A. Doudna ↗

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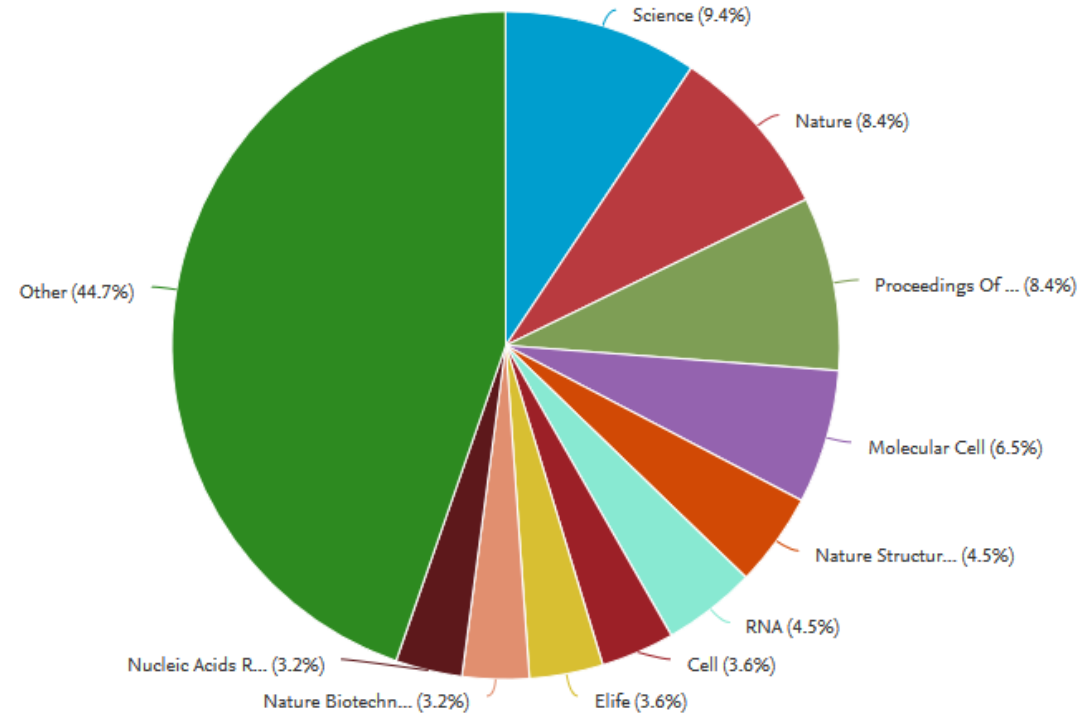
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Award

- Middle paragraphs
 - Address the award description
 - What makes this candidate unique?
 - Compare to previous awardees
 - Specific examples of achievements
- Closing paragraph
 - Summarize why this is a good, great, excellent candidate

School (Graduate, Medical, Veterinary)

- Middle paragraphs
 - Address the instructions
 - Often looking for the following
 - Research experience
 - Service to the community—especially Global experience
 - Leadership
 - Experience in the field (medicine, veterinary, research)
 - Hobbies or evidence that they are a well rounded person
 - Academic achievements
- They get lots of applications.
 - What makes this person unique?
 - What makes you think they will succeed?
 - How will they contribute to the university?

LOR Tips

- Have the ad/job, promotion, award information available.
 - Use T Format match need with have
- Highlight key words depending on job description:
 - **Research, Education, Clinical Excellence, Service**
- Cite specific examples of outstanding behavior or achievements
- Make letter unique-- Describe things not listed on CV
- Be succinct
- When appropriate, ask candidate to prove you with important information they want highlighted
- The tone & length of your letter should indicate exactly how excited you are about the candidate
- Send your letter on time!!!

LOR Tips

- Have the ad/j
 - Use T Form:
- Highlight key
 - Research, E
- Cite specific e
- Make letter u
- Be succinct
- When approp information t
- The tone & le are about the
- Send your let



ts

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Avoiding Gender Bias



LOR- Avoiding Gender Bias

LORs for women are:

- Significantly shorter & 4X less likely to mention the applicants' publications & research.
- 1/2 as likely to mention specific accomplishments such as leadership roles & awards.
- More focused on effort ("hard working, dependable") and personality traits ("delightful") in women's letters, rather than ability ("skilled, independent") & use of fewer superlatives ("best, excellent")
- More "irrelevant", vague or unexplained content. 7X more likely to include comments about the applicant's family, children & personal life.
- More often have descriptors such as 'caring', 'helpful,' & 'compassionate' whereas words such as "successful," & "accomplished," are more likely in letters for men. These are ALL positive traits but they also reinforce gender stereotypes.

LOR- Avoiding Gender Bias

- **Be comprehensive:** Include leadership roles, research, publications, and other important content in all letters regardless of gender.
- **Emphasize accomplishments, rather than effort.** Where appropriate, use terms such as successful, excellent, accomplished, skilled, knowledgeable, research, insightful, and independent.
- **Keep it professional.** Use formal titles, such as Dr. and Chief Resident, and surnames instead of first names - for both men and women.
- **Avoid the irrelevant:** Don't mention personal life and other information irrelevant to their future role.
- **Don't reinforce gender stereotypes** with your words.

Avoid Communal Adjectives	Avoid Grindstone Adjectives	Adjectives to Include	
Caring	Hard-working	Successful	Ambitious
Compassionate	Conscientious	Talented	Independent
Nurturing	Dependable	Excellent	Intelligent
Interpersonal	Diligent	Accomplished	Expert
Warm	Dedicated	Outstanding	Analytical
Helpful	Tactful	Skilled	Superb
Sympathetic	Meticulous	Knowledgeable	Exceptional
Nice	Reliable	Insightful	Unique
Agreeable	Responsible	Resourceful	Remarkable
	Organized	Confident	

Example

Dr. Scholar has had a long and impressive career as an academic physician and has inspired many women to follow in her very able footsteps. After a highly productive career as a physician, teacher and researcher, Dr. Scholar turned her attention to leadership in academic medicine, both for her own interest and to help others. Her current role as Senior Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs is one that allows her many opportunities to help faculty members reach their potential.

Prior to becoming Associate Dean, Dr. Scholar was Vice Chair of her Department of Procedural Medicine. In this role, she mentored the junior faculty, and trained other senior faculty to be mentors, both in her own and in other departments. She paid meticulous attention to the needs of the department, and diligently ensured that faculty recruitments, expectations and schedules adhered to the highest standards. Her personal warmth and collegiality were widely recognized, and she was a welcome addition to any team or committee lucky enough to include her.

Dr. Scholar is a pioneer in the field of mentorship. While Vice Chair for her Department of Procedural Medicine, she created a mentorship program which was adopted by the entire medical center. Following the success of her local program, she obtained a \$1.7 million grant from the prestigious Roger Rock Johnston Foundation. As Principle Investigator (PI), she effectively partnered with leaders at 5 major institutions, and helped create a model faculty mentorship that has led to 15 publications, 14 grants for a total of \$2.6 million and the promotion of 37 assistant professors to associate professor, and 28 associate professors to full professors, 34% of them women. The poster she and her group presented at the Society of Long Anticipated Change in 2003 won their most prestigious award, the Golden Axe.

Example

Dr. Scholar is an intelligent, conscientious and hard-working physician who is highly motivated. She is very careful and thorough, always well prepared for the work day, and always willing to “go the extra mile” for the patient. She has been and continues to be a highly valued clinician whose interest and ability to hear her patients’ needs coupled with her diligence and disciplined approach to problem solving has led to her becoming the choice of generations of patients, as well as many clinicians and their own families.

Dr. Scholar’s popularity as a teacher is illustrated by her “Teacher of the Year” Award in 1999. She took her interest in teaching to a national level through her involvement with regional educational meetings, and production of a series of educational slides and presentations which she presented nationally. She has lectured all over the country including multiple visiting professorships and has taught at many national workshops and courses.

As a teacher and researcher, Dr. Scholar has been a model for other women physicians. She has had numerous scientific exhibits, abstracts, and peer review journal articles as well as multiple book chapters. Many of these articles presented an innovative technique to the medical community. The early articles on these topics are both considered seminal works. She directed the well known research enterprise for her department. In this role, she has mentored many very capable post doctoral students, many of them women, who have gone on to prominent positions of their own.

Dr. Scholar is an extraordinary physician and teacher highly regarded in her department and throughout the medical community. Her ability to hear her patient’s needs coupled with her extensive knowledge of Procedural Medicine and her insightful approach to problem solving has led to her becoming the choice of generations of patients, as well as many clinicians and their own families.

Dr. Scholar’s teaching strengths are illustrated by her “Teacher of the Year” Award in 1999 and by appointment as Chair of the Educational and Programs Committee of the Procedural Innovation Society. Dr. Scholar has been an invited visiting professor over 300 times, in more than 35 countries, actually lecturing and teaching in two languages.

As a teacher and researcher, Dr. Scholar is a model for other physicians and for many accomplished researchers. She has published over 200 peer reviewed journal articles as well as multiple book chapters, scientific exhibits, and abstracts. Her first- authored, early articles on innovative techniques in her specialty are considered seminal works. As Director of the Laboratory for Innovative Research, she mentored post doctoral students for over a decade, most of who have gone on to prominent positions of their own.

Example

Once Dr. Scholar turned her attention to career paths for women in medicine, her persistence, and determination began to pay dividends, initially for women who worked with her, and ultimately for women across the country. She recognized that women often face disadvantages due to the challenge of the tenure clock occurring simultaneously with childbearing and early childhood responsibilities for many women and she spent countless hours educating the medical community, ultimately leading to important changes in our promotion policies. Seeing that part time work was often a disadvantage for women in this setting as well, she benchmarked with other institutions to bring the information to the attention of our Dean, and was able, once again, to affect policy changes that helped many of our junior women faculty.

In summary, I can see no reason not to give this award to Dr. Scholar. Her tireless efforts on behalf of women have certainly earned her some measure of well earned recognition. Her continual work in this area of endeavor continues to increase her skills and abilities and I have no doubt that we will see even more of her accomplishments in the years to come.

As Senior Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs, Dr. Scholar used her insight and experience to create leadership initiatives to the benefit of faculty both locally and nationally. She recognized that women often face disadvantages due to the challenge of the tenure clock occurring simultaneously with childbearing and early childhood responsibilities and she spearheaded a program to educate the medical community, and to change promotion policies. Seeing that part time work was often a disadvantage for women and junior faculty, she launched a multi-institutional study of human resource practices and authored policy changes that benefited the faculty and served as a national model and resource.

Dr. Scholar has our highest possible recommendation for this award. Her vision and leadership are remarkable, and her accomplishments have been transformative for our institution. She has been a role model, change agent, and advocate of faculty nationally. She truly embodies the achievements described by the National Women in Medicine Leadership Award.

Summary—Writing LORs

- Letters supporting promotion, first or new job, and Award nominations are most common
- Be sure to review CVs before saying yes, allow plenty of time to write, and have someone else proofread
- Showcases what makes person unique.
- Avoid communal & grindstone words. Be quantitative and use standout words.

Questions?



Thank You!

- Thank you to everyone who shared examples
- Happy to review your LORs
- Please take a few minutes to fill out your workshop evaluation

The text 'THANK YOU!' is displayed in a large, bold, sans-serif font. Each letter is a different color: 'T' is green, 'H' is yellow, 'A' is light blue, 'N' is purple, 'K' is red, 'Y' is dark blue, 'O' is green, 'U' is orange, and the exclamation point is yellow.

<https://pathology.wustl.edu/office-of-faculty-development/>

Resources

- <https://www.aamc.org/professional-development/affinity-groups/gfa/faculty-vitae/art-successful-nominations>
- https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding_gender_bias_in_letter_of_reference_writing.pdf
- <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/01/19/advice-how-write-effective-tenure-review-letters>
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