Sharing some experiences in writing recommendation letters

The view of a theoretical astrophysicist

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This is *not* a lecture

- There is no way that I can "teach" you anything.

  - I am not qualified!

- There is no such thing as a "perfect letter that meets all demands".

- However, there are certain things that **you should never do** when writing a letter of recommendation.

  - I have learned (hard) lessons from my own mistakes in the past. I would like to share them with you today.

- **Today's goal:** To share some of my personal experiences with you. It is not a comprehensive presentation; just some (bad) examples.

Background

- I am a theoretical astrophysicist and tend to work with a small group of people.

  - My papers are usually written with a few coauthors; mostly less than 10 authors.

- As a result, I always have a very detailed view of individuals for whom I write letters of recommendation.

  - **My belief**: <u>detailed anecdotes</u> are most powerful in letters.

- If you have a very large group and cannot remember individuals very well, perhaps you need to reconsider your supervision style.

When in doubt, say "No"
"No" can be much better than "Yes (but a weak letter)".

- If you agree to write a letter of recommendation, you should write a strong one.

- If you cannot write a strong letter, have the courage to say "**No**" when asked to write a letter. This is much better for the candidate.

  - The most harmful is a letter that is generic, mediocre, and less informative.

  - Just because you say nothing bad about the candidate doesn't mean it's a good letter! Saying something superficially nice (like "he is very good" without details or contexts) will only hurt the candidate, because it suggests that you don't know the candidate well or that you don't think the candidate is excellent.

- Often, however, you have to write a letter for a weak candidate (your student). In that case, I think you need to talk to the candidate and give an honest feedback. It's easy to be nice; it's hard to be truly helpful. We should all strive to be helpful.

Part I: The candidate first.

The letter is for the candidate.

Not for yourself! Praise the candidate first.

- I often see letters in which letter writers advertise their work too much. Are you writing a letter for the candidate or for yourself?

  - **<u>Bad Example</u>**: "*Let me introduce myself. I am Assistant Professor at the University of Tokyo and my group is developing novel quantum technologies that have the potential to transform the precision measurement of atoms with the exquisite control of their environment. Such technologies are essential for quantum computing. [blah blah blah…] Mr./Ms. XXX has contributed an important part of this technology through [whatever], and I appreciate his/her hard work*."

- **This is terrible.** Praise the candidate first, and fill in details via anecdotes.

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  - **<u>Better Example</u>**: "*Mr./Ms. XXX is excellent. He/she is independent and innovative, and has become an expert in the so-called [whatever], a key to the success of the recent development in quantum technology with a wide range of applications including quantum computing. Specifically, he/she solved a critical problem that our group was facing. Initially, I was skeptical of his/her solution, but he/she convinced me and the rest of the group that the problem had been solved and our project had been saved. I was deeply impressed by his/her talent as an experimentalist.*"

- **The more specific the anecdote is, the better the letter becomes.**

Part II: My biggest mistake.

My biggest mistake
Sexism

- In 2008, I wrote a letter of recommendation for a female PhD student who applied for a postdoc position. I had a very high opinion of the candidate and wanted to write a strong letter. I wrote:

    - *"I would place her in the middle of the following group of talented young female cosmologists, [famous names], when they were at a similar career stage."*

- One reviewer wrote to me, saying *"Eiichiro, what you wrote is sexist. This should not happen"*.

    - I was shocked to discover that I had done something terrible. I will forever be grateful to this reviewer for waking me up.

And there are more
Examples of bias in letters

- *"She is the best among her female peers."*

  - Why compare only to female peers? This is the mistake I made in 2008.

- *"She is caring, hardworking, and a good team player."*

  - instead of saying, *"She is brilliant, independent, and has a leadership potential."* What the hell is "caring" and "hardworking"? Praise the candidate's **scientific** and **intellectual** ability.

See an article in Science published in 2016:
https://www.science.org/content/article/recommendation-letters-reflect-gender-bias

Also see an article in Physics Today published in 2018:
https://physicstoday.scitation.org/doi/10.1063/PT.3.3870

More general remark, regardless of gender
Focus on the *intellectual ability* and *scientific achievements.*

- I often see that letter writers comment on things like "*the candidate is hardworking*", "*the candidate has a sense of humour*", "*the candidate is cheerful*", etc.

  - I saw these comments for candidates of any gender.

- **These comments are not helpful.** If these comments were written in the letter without much about the candidate's intellectual ability or scientific achievements, my conclusion would be:

  - OK, so, the letter writers have nothing good to say about the candidate's intellectual ability or scientific achievements!

https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding_gender_bias_in_letter_of_reference_writing.pdf

We all share bias

It is important to remember that unconscious gender bias isn't a male problem. Research shows that women are just as susceptible to these common pitfalls as men.
This is a problem for all of us - let's solve it together!

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
Commission on the Status of Women

Research from Trix, F & Psenka, C. Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty. Discourse & Society, 2003; and Madera, JM, Hebl, MR, & Martin, RC. Gender and letters of Recommendation for Academia: Agentic and Communal Differences. Journal of Applied Psychology, 2009.
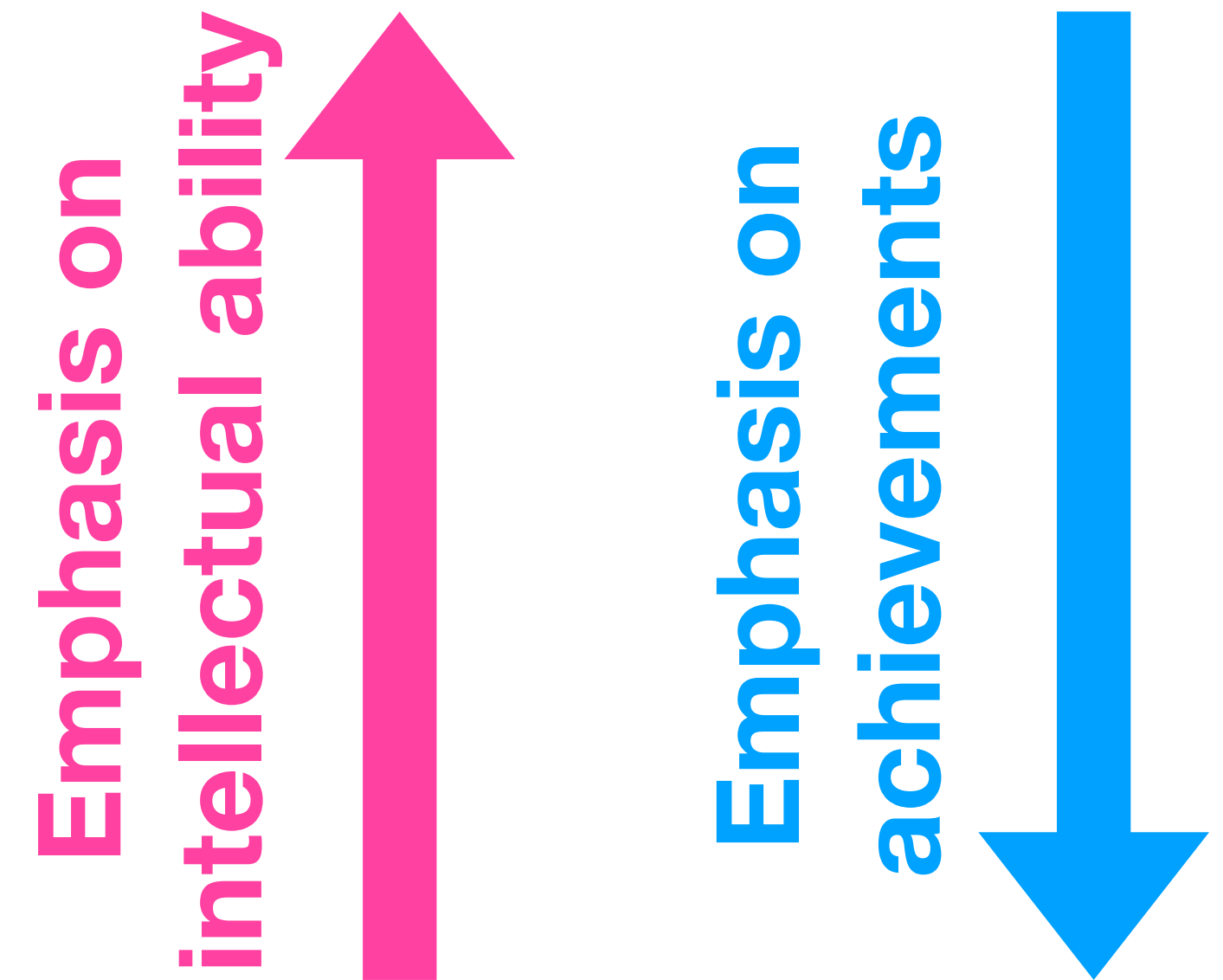
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Adjectives to avoid:

caring
compassionate
hard-working
conscientious
dependable
diligent
dedicated
tactful
interpersonal
warm
helpful

Adjectives to include:

successful
excellent
accomplished
outstanding
skilled
knowlegeable
insightful
resourceful
confident
ambitious
independent
intellectual

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Part III: Example letters.

Some examples

- Now I will show you some example letters for

  - PhD students applying for postdoc positions;

  - Postdocs applying for postdoc positions;

  - Postdocs applying for faculty positions; and

  - Faculty applying for faculty positions.

- In my letter writing style, the level of detail in the description of research achievements increases as the candidate advances in seniority. For PhD, the intellectual excellence is most emphasised, whereas for faculty the most important research achievement (and mentoring skill) is highlighted.

Emphasis on intellectual ability

Emphasis on achievements

FAQ: How long should a letter be?

There is no correct answer. It is my personal opinion!

- **Definitely more than a page.** Some letter writers write 1/2-page letters with no detailed contents. Such letters are not helpful. But, <u>not much more than 2 pages</u>, to concentrate the content of the letter on the candidate's major strengths. A rule of thumb I often use:

- <u>For postdoc applications</u>: up to 2 pages.

  - *For PhD students*: the letter doesn't need to detail student's research, as that is what the student should include in their Research Statement. Rather, it is better to focus on anecdotes that demonstrate the candidate's intellectual ability. The letter should tell how independent the student was, how the student solved the key issues, etc.

- <u>For faculty applications</u>: up to 3 pages.

  - One or two of the candidate's major research accomplishments can be highlighted here to help guide the reviewers as to which accomplishments to focus on.

Example letters are omitted here for data protection.

You may say, "Well, that is only the view of a theoretical astrophysicist.

My research area has a different culture."

- Yes, I agree.

- Still, I offer two take-home messages, which I believe are applicable to any areas.

    1. **Praise the candidate**, rather than the group to which the candidate belongs. **Use anecdotes** to justify your assessment.

    2. Be aware that letters of recommendation may contain **sexist language**. This applies to candidates and letter writers *regardless of gender*.

Or, if you need only one message from me:

Focus on the candidate's intellectual ability and scientific achievements.

- But, what do I know? I would love to hear your opinions. **Let's discuss!**