

Guidelines for Writing Effective Tenure Evaluation Letters
Faculty Development Committee Fall 2024

In preparation for writing your letter:

- Observe the candidate in the classroom (see separate handout for teaching observation guidelines.).
- Examine some of the candidate's professional materials, such as a CV, published books or articles, original creative works, and/or research presentations.
 - Especially if your field is outside that of the candidate's, schedule time for the candidate to discuss their research and/or creative works with you.
- Investigate the candidate's record of service to the institution, their profession, and the community.

Guidelines for addressing each tenure standard:

- Review the tenure standards in the Faculty Handbook before writing your letter. If you are not sure how one or more standard manifests in the candidate's field/department, talk to that faculty member's department chair.
- Your letter should clearly address the candidate's strengths and areas of improvement for each of the three tenure standards: **Effective Teaching and Advising**, **Professional Expression and Development**, and **Service**.

	Effective Teaching and Advising	Professional Expression and Development	Service
Elements to Consider	- Effectiveness of course delivery - Quality of course content, course development, and/or curriculum development - Effectiveness in managing multiple course sections - Recognition of teaching - Use of research and original/creative work and/or service to enhance teaching	_____ of research and original/creative work: - Quality - Productivity - Program or focus - Sustainability - Recognition - Use of teaching and/or service to enhance research and original/creative work	Service to _____: - the Institution - the Profession - the Community - as a faculty mentor to tenure-earning faculty - Use of teaching and/or scholarly work to enhance service
Evidence to Support Assessment	- Report of classroom observation - Review of syllabi - Review of instructional materials/assignments	- CV - Published works - Original/creative works - Presentations - Success in obtaining grant funding	- CV - Outside letters - Faculty statement

		- Supplemental evidence (i.e. downloads, citations, etc.)	
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When writing your letter, DO:

- Refer to the Faculty Handbook for Coe's tenure standards.
- Clearly address the criteria of teaching, scholarly work, and service in your letter. Support your assessment of the candidate's effectiveness in each area with evidence from your preparation phase (above).
- Be succinct, and give concrete examples of success and/or areas of improvement.
- Take into account the candidate's improvement over time, as well as their self-awareness of their own strengths and challenges.
- Offer constructive feedback; honest critiques lend credibility to the compliments.
 - When writing constructive feedback, do not write anything that you would not feel comfortable saying directly to the instructor.
- Be consistent about referring to the candidate by their professional title (i.e. Dr. Zaius).

When writing your letter, DO NOT:

- Refer to unsubstantiated rumors.
- Air dirty laundry or "vent."
- Comment on the candidate's personality.
- Use gendered descriptions.
- Use hyperbolic language (positive or negative).

When to say "no" to writing an evaluation letter:

- If you lack sufficient expertise;
- If your schedule prohibits you from preparing and/or writing such a letter;
- If you feel you have undue bias (positive or negative) toward the candidate.

Best Practices: Classroom Observations & Tenure Evaluation Letter Writing

STRUCTURED CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

BEFORE OBSERVATION:

- Review the course syllabus to understand course objectives and expectations
- Meet with instructor to discuss:
 - a. Objectives/assessments/learning outcomes described in syllabus
 - b. Unstated objectives – what do they want to see happening in class?
 - c. Teaching methods and why they use these methods
 - d. Feelings about what's going well in class
 - e. Anything specific they would like you to pay attention to
 - f. Concerns about the class, if any
 - g. How the instructor knows the students are learning

DURING OBSERVATION:

- Have specific goals and take good notes
- Be an observer, not a participant in class unless otherwise requested
- Refer to checklist on page 2 for specific things to consider during your observation

AFTER OBSERVATION:

Meet with the instructor to determine:

- To what extent they feel objectives were met
- How much this class period was like a “typical” class period
- What they feel could have been better/done differently

It's highly **recommended** that you and the instructor agree that you will provide constructive feedback on what you observed to improve teaching (*although not explicitly necessary to complete an evaluation*).

STRUCTURED CLASSROOM OBSERVATION CHECKLIST:**CONTENT:**

- ☐ makes purpose of meeting/lecture clear and connects to previous content
- ☐ presents material in well-organized manner and is clear in explanations
- ☐ defines and explains unfamiliar terms and concepts
- ☐ uses clear and appropriate examples to clarify points
- ☐ focuses on the topic and instructional objectives without getting sidetracked
- ☐ is explicit about expectations for the course/lecture/assignment

PRESENTATION:

- ☐ begins promptly and gets to work
- ☐ paces lecture/activity appropriately and adjusts pace when necessary
- ☐ uses a variety of strategies rather than lecture alone
- ☐ practices, models and supervises for safety in classroom activities
- ☐ projects voice and makes visual materials easily accessible to all learners
- ☐ maintains eye contact

INTERACTION:

- ☐ interacts with students and solicits questions/discussion
- ☐ responds to questions or comments and provides corrective feedback when needed
- ☐ assesses whether students are comprehending the material in real time
- ☐ listens to students and engages with their verbal and nonverbal signals
- ☐ encourages student engagement with each other
- ☐ provides a respectful classroom climate by allowing students to speak freely and attempts to relate to students as people
- ☐ uses humor when appropriate

WRITING AN EFFECTIVE TENURE EVALUATION LETTER

PREPARING:

- Complete a classroom observation
- Examine professional materials; CV, published books or articles, original creative works, research/presentations. If you work in a different field, schedule a time to discuss research and/or creative works
- Investigate record of service to Coe, to profession, and to the community

ADDRESSING TENURE STANDARDS:

- Before writing your letter, review tenure standards found in the [Faculty Handbook](#). If you're not sure how one or more standards relates to the instructor's field/department, talk to the department chair.
- Your letter should clearly address strengths and, where needed, areas of improvement for each of the three tenure standards: **Effective Teaching and Advising**, **Professional Expression and Development**, and **Service**.

	Effective Teaching and Advising	Professional Expression and Development	Service
Elements to Consider	-Effectiveness of course delivery -Quality of course content, development, and/or curriculum -Effectiveness in managing multiple course sections -Recognition of teaching -Use of research and original/creative work and/or service to enhance teaching	____ of research and original/creative work: -Quality -Productivity -Program or focus -Sustainability -Recognition -Use of teaching and/or service to enhance research and original/creative work	Service to ____: -Coe College -the profession -the community -as a faculty mentor to tenure-earning faculty -Use of teaching and/or scholarly work to enhance service
Evidence to Support Evaluation	-Report of classroom observation -review of syllabi -review of instructional materials	-CV -Published works -Original/creative works -Presentations	

COMPOSING EVALUATION LETTERS

BEST PRACTICES:

- Refer to the Faculty Handbook for tenure standards.

- Clearly address criteria of teaching, scholarly work, and service with supporting assessment of instructor's effectiveness in each area with evidence from your research and observations.
- Give concrete examples of successes and/or areas for improvement.
- Take into account the instructor's improvement over time, as well as their self-awareness of strengths and challenges.
- Offer constructive feedback; honest critiques lend credibility to the compliments.
- Maintain a high level of professionalism.

AVOIDING BIAS:

Unconscious, or implicit bias is the automatic, unintentional attribution of particular qualities to a certain social group. It is common for letters or recommendations to include unintended gender and racial biases.

- Emphasize accomplishments, not efforts, avoiding "grindstone" adjectives like *hardworking*, *dependable*, *diligent*, *dedicated*. These are associated with effort, not ability.
- Be careful about raising doubt, including negative language, faint praise, and irrelevancies. Ex. "Although Sarah has not done a lot of...", "He has a somewhat challenging personality." "Bright, enthusiastic; responds well to feedback." "He is active in church."
- Keep it professional: personal anecdotes or information is almost irrelevant.
- Stay away from gendered stereotypes:
 - Female/Communal adjectives: helpful, caring, compassionate, warm nurturing agreeable, tactful, sensitive.
 - Male/Agentic adjectives: confident, ambitious, accomplished, skilled, intellectual, outstanding, assertive, outspoken, independent.

SAYING NO:

If you're asked to write a Tenure Evaluation Letter, remember you have the option to say NO:

- If you lack sufficient expertise
- If your schedule prohibits you from preparing adequately
- If you feel you have undue bias (positive or negative) toward the candidate.



Avoiding Bias

LETTERS of RECOMMENDATION

Elements of Useful Letters

Focus on the applicant:

could include the commitment and relationship of the writer to the applicant.

Description of applicant's record:

focussed on evidence.

Evaluation of accomplishments of the applicant.**Timely delivery:**

submitting recommendation letters prior to deadlines is appreciated!

COMMON BIASES

Unconscious, or implicit bias is the automatic, unintentional attribution of particular qualities to a certain social group. Research and analysis of recommendation letters in academia and for clinical/research faculty positions at medical schools concluded common gender biases we should be aware of when writing letters of recommendation.



Letter Length

On average, letters for men are 16% longer than letters for women. Letters for women are more likely to lack basic features like concrete references to the applicants record or accomplishment and how the writer knew the applicant.



Research vs Teach

Letters for men have a greater frequency of reference to terms of praise and the status category of "research" while letters for women contain greater frequency in reference to "teaching" and "training."



Personal vs Professional

Reference letters for women are seven times more likely to mention their personal life (almost always irrelevant for the application). Reference letters for men are more likely to include professional titles; letters for women more often refer to the applicant by first name.

Resources:

Trix, F. & Psenka, C. (2003) "Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty." *Discourse & Society*, 2003.

Madera, JM, Hebl, MR, & Martin, RC. "Gender and Letters of Recommendation for Academia: Agentic and Communal Differences." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2009.

LETTERS of RECOMMENDATION: Avoiding Bias



Grindstone Adjectives

as in putting one's shoulder to the grindstone...

Letters for women are 50% more likely to include **grindstone adjectives**: *hardworking, conscientious, dependable, meticulous, thorough, diligent, dedicated, and careful*, associating effort with women and ability with men in professional areas.

- "I found Williams to be *hard-working, thorough, and conscientious* in providing all aspects of patient care."
- "She is an extremely *conscientious and meticulous* researcher who devotes the time to laboratory work and the training of graduate students in laboratory technique."



Gender Stereotypes (Communal vs Agentic)

Social role theory: men are conceived to be "agentic" - aggressive, independent, self-confident and women are conceived to be "communal" - helping others, kind, maintaining relationships. Communal characteristics have been negatively associated with hiring decisions in academia.

Communal/Female : *helpful, caring, compassionate, warm, nurturing, agreeable, tactful, dedicated, sensitive*

Agentic/Male : *confident, ambitious, accomplished, skilled, intellectual, outstanding, assertive, outspoken independent*



Doubt Raisers

Letters for women are twice as likely to contain "doubt raisers" as letters written for men. Doubt raisers include negative language, along with hedges, potentially negative comments, unexplained comments, faint praise, and irrelevancies.

- "Although Sarah has not done a lot of ..."
- "She has a somewhat challenging personality..."
- "It appears that her health and personal life are stable."
- "Bright, enthusiastic; responds well to feedback."
- "I have every confidence that Bill will become better than average."
- "He is active in church"

Resources:

Trix, F. & Psenka, C. (2003) "Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty." *Discourse & Society*, 2003.

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