

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Gender-based differences in letters of recommendation written for ophthalmology residency applicants

Fei Lin¹, Soo Kyung Oh¹, Lynn K. Gordon², Stacy L. Pineles¹, Jamie B. Rosenberg² and Irena Tsui^{1*}

Abstract

Background: To determine whether gender-based differences may be present in letters of recommendation written for ophthalmology residency applicants.

Methods: All applications submitted through SF Match to the UCLA Stein Eye Institute Residency Training Program from the 2017–2018 application cycle were analyzed using validated text analysis software (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (Austin, TX)). The main outcome measures were differences in language use in letters of recommendation by gender of applicant.

Results: Of 440 applicants, 254 (58%) were male and 186 (42%) were female. The two gender groups had similar United States Medical Licensing Exam (USMLE) Step 1 scores, undergraduate grade point averages (uGPA's), proportions of underrepresented minority (URM) applicants and Gold Humanism Honor Society members, numbers of academic and service activities listed, and gender distributions of their letter writers (all *P* values > 0.05). However, letters written for male applicants were determined to use more "authentic" words than those written for female applicants (mean difference, 0.800; 95% CI, 0.001–1.590; *P* = 0.047). Letters written for male applicants also contained more "leisure" words (mean difference, 0.056; 95% CI, 0.008–0.104; *P* = 0.023) and fewer "feel" words (mean difference, 0.033; 95% CI, 0.001–0.065; *P* = 0.041) and "biological processes" words (mean difference, 0.157; 95% CI, 0.017–0.297; *P* = 0.028).

Conclusions: There were gender differences detected in recommendation letters in ophthalmology consistent with prior studies from other fields. Awareness of these differences may improve residency selection processes.

Keywords: Ophthalmology, Residency, Gender, Application, Bias

Background

In the past few years, ophthalmology residency selection has become a highly competitive process. The Ophthalmology Residency Match Summary Report 2017 revealed a mean United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) Step 1 score of 243 (interquartile range, 236–252) for applicants who successfully matched into residency programs, compared to the United States and Canada mean (SD) of 229 (20). In 2017, 22% of ophthalmology residency applicants did not match into any program.

Competitive residency programs, including ophthalmology programs, rely heavily on cognitive measures in their selection processes to recruit top-tier medical school graduates [1]. However, cognitive metrics, including USMLE Step 1 scores, have been poor predictors of success in residency. In 2002, the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education identified six Core Competencies that residents must master in their training. Imbedded in those competencies are many non-cognitive factors, such as interpersonal and communication skills, which can be evaluated through letters of recommendation.

Thought to provide insight into applicants' non-cognitive traits, letters of recommendation written on behalf of applicants can grasp the attention of selection

* Correspondence: itsui@stanu.edu

¹Department of Ophthalmology, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Full list of author information is available at the end of the article



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Table of Contents Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology

1. Understanding the eBook Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology User Reviews and Ratings

- Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology and Bestseller Lists
- 5. Accessing Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology Free and Paid eBooks
 - Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology Public Domain eBooks
 - Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology eBook Subscription Services
 - Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology Compatibility with Devices
 - Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
 - Interactive Elements Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
- 8. Staying Engaged with Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
 - Setting Reading Goals Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Sample Letters Of Recommendation For Ophthalmology
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources

13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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