

Avoiding Biases in Course Evaluations: A Guide for Students

I. Who sees course evaluations, and what are they used for?

- Your instructors, in order to improve the course
 - *Make sure to distinguish questions asking about your **instructor** vs. questions asking about the course (since your instructor may lack control – or have only indirect control – over certain courses, e.g. Common Curriculum)*
- College administrators, in order to evaluate the job performance of your instructors for purposes of tenure and promotion
 - *Use tone, language, and style that you wouldn't mind them seeing!*

NB: All course evaluations are strictly anonymous, and neither of the above will be able to trace your feedback to you. This means you can be 100% honest and direct, but do try and provide information that is helpful for these purposes.

II. How do we know that student course evaluations are often biased?

A large number of studies since at least the 1980s have found that (1) students may not accurately assess right away how much they have learned, and (2) there are significant gaps between scores for men vs. women, White vs. non-White instructors, etc. To take just two examples:

- Braga, Paccagnella, & Pellizzari (2014) looked at students randomly assigned to different professors teaching Microeconomics I classes, checking how well they did the following year in Macroeconomics II. They found that students who did *better* in the later course actually gave their professors *lower* ratings, because these professors required students to exert more effort.
- MacNell, Driscoll, & Hunt (2015) looked at students in a sociology course taught entirely online. Instructors took on two sections each, one under their real name and one under the name of the other instructor. Students in the two groups that *perceived* their instructor to be a man gave statistically significantly higher ratings on professionalism, promptness, fairness, respectfulness, enthusiasm (and non-statistically significant higher ratings on all the other questions) than those in the groups that perceived their instructor to be a woman, *regardless of the instructors' actual gender*.

III. How can we avoid bias when we evaluate others' performance?

All of us are subject to implicit biases about gender, race, age, body size, etc. that shape our non-conscious expectations of what different people should be like. This in turn shapes the kinds of judgments we make about them. For instance, if you are non-consciously doubtful that a woman is really competent enough to do something, you might write a minimal assurance (e.g. 'she can do the job') rather than the full endorsement you would give the man ('he is the best for the job') – indeed, such minimal assurances are 2.5 times more likely in recommendation letters written on behalf of women rather than men! Such biases are present in *both* women and men letter-writers.

The following tips are drawn from advice for professors writing recommendation letters for students, but they are applicable to all kinds of performance evaluations.

- Provide objectively describable facts, e.g. the kind and amount of feedback your instructor provided, the variety of exercises performed in class, the types of materials and resources provided
- Avoid adjectives associated with stereotypes about gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, age, etc. – a data analysis of *Rate My Professors* shows that the words ‘smart,’ ‘intellect,’ and ‘genius’ are much more likely to be used for men, while ‘bossy,’ ‘nurturing,’ ‘strict,’ and ‘frumpy’ are much more likely to be used for women
- Keep it professional – evaluations of women are 7 times more likely to mention personal details that are irrelevant for job performance
- Add details – on average, positive evaluations are 16% longer for men than women
- Emphasize accomplishments, not effort – evaluations of women are 50% more likely to include adjectives describing effort (e.g. ‘hardworking’) rather than ability
- Be honest but *mindful* about when you intend to raise doubts – comments like ‘I am sure that Prof. X will eventually become a great teacher’ are twice as common in evaluations of women!
- Make sure that you refer to all your instructors with their proper titles (or however they like to be addressed). Women, people of color, etc. are much more likely to be addressed as ‘Mrs.’ instead of ‘Dr.’ or ‘Prof.’ compared to White men.

Thank you for filling out your course evaluations – your time and effort are greatly appreciated!

Sources

Braga, Michela, Marco Paccagnella, and Michele Pellizzari. “Evaluating students’ evaluations of professors.” *Economics of Education Review* 41 (2014): 71-88.

“Avoiding Gender Bias in Reference Writing.” Available at:
https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding_gender_bias_in_letter_of_reference_writing.pdf

“Gendered Language in Teaching Evaluations.” Data visualization tool available at:
benschmidt.org/profGender/

MacNell, Lillian, Adam Driscoll, and Andrea N. Hunt. “What’s in a name: Exposing gender bias in student ratings of teaching.” *Innovative Higher Education* 40.4 (2015): 291-303