Throughout the letter, the writer uses they/their pronouns incorrectly. Use they/their just as you would use she/her or he/him. We’ve bolded the points below that the pronouns should be used better.

Dear Professor Lee:

I am writing this letter of recommendation on behalf of Dr. Alex Johnson, in support of their application to your postdoctoral position at University Laboratory. I was Dr. Johnson’s faculty advisor at Technical College Institute and have known Alex in both a research and personal capacity over the last seven years.

There is no need to include the number of years it took to complete a degree program unless it is remarkably short.

While it has taken Dr. Johnson longer than expected to finish their PhD, I can truly attest to the all the hard work they put in to accomplish this goal.

Mentioning that it took Dr. Johnson “longer than expected to finish their PhD” is a negative and should not be included as the first bit of information provided about them. Mentioning “all the hard work” could create an impression that they had to work harder for the same results than their peers, and could be reframed in a way that does not create that impression, for example by talking in terms of work ethic.

Make sure whatever positive adjectives included here are backed up by examples in the body of the letter. This could be better explained, for example: “University Laboratory would be lucky to have a candidate with such a diverse skill set encompassing deep mathematical rigor, strong publication/writing skills and excellent presentation/teaching skills.”

Dr. Johnson first came to Technical College Institute with a background in pure mathematics, and thus took a little time to get “up to speed” on what we were doing in my Aeronomy Lab.

This presents Dr. Johnson’s background as a negative instead of a positive. A background in mathematics could be an example of a positive quality for Dr. Johnson, but it needs supporting information, for example, how it provided a unique perspective/approach to solving the problems in their dissertation research. It could be presented as a benefit for dealing with theoretical elements of gas and magnetoionic systems. This could also support the diverse skill set touted in the opening paragraph. The use of quotes around colloquial phrases (“up to speed”) looks unprofessional and is better reserved for personal letters.

While their mathematical rigor was top-notch, their grasping “easy” atmospheric and ionospheric concepts took some time.

This is giving a negative impression but it could be reframed, for example: “Dr. Johnson’s background meant their mathematical rigor was top-notch, and they demonstrated the ability to develop skills in atmospheric and ionospheric physics as they worked in my Aeronomy Lab.”

Specifically, I recall one instance where I very directly stated to Dr. Johnson that they were going to need to “step it up, or they would not be able to continue in the program.” From there, Dr. Johnson persisted and overcame these initial challenges, but continued to react very sensitively to any comments deemed to be “critical” moving forward.

This is not necessary, as it highlights Dr. Johnson’s difficulties rather than their strength in overcoming this challenge. The first part is both negative and tells us more about the author’s management style than it does about the applicant; it can be deleted entirely.

This story exemplifies two things about Dr. Johnson: they are determined and a hard-worker, but they tend to be sensitive about their work.

“Hard-working” is a female-coded adjective and should be balanced by or replaced with a male-coded adjective to avoid causing an unconscious negative reaction in the reader. Are they really sensitive about their work, or does the writer merely perceive it that way due to their unconscious expectations for someone of Dr. Johnson’s gender? Even if this is true, is it something that makes Dr. Johnson a good candidate for this position? If not, don’t include it. Positive character attributes that can be perceived as “sensitive about their work” include: passionate, invested, and engaged, so one rewording could be “Dr. Johnson overcame the initial challenges of their PhD and persisted, exemplifying their determination and their passion for their work.”

After this brief hiccup in the beginning of their tenure at Technical College Institute, Dr. Johnson began to “take off”, excelling both academically and personally.

Don’t word it as a “brief hiccup” as this has negative connotations; changing disciplines is difficult and a longer start-up period is expected. This can be presented positively instead of negatively, for example, “After successfully familiarizing themselves with the relevant physics…”. Because it is expected, it should not be the primary focus of this letter. The phrase “take off” should, again, not be used as it is colloquial.

Although **they** publication record are not numerous (i.e., only 4 peer-reviewed pubs), they showed promise in this area.

Saying “only four peer-reviewed publications” makes this a negative and “showing promise” is a backhanded compliment, but this could be reframed in a positive light. For instance, “Dr Johnson’s four peer-reviewed papers are valuable contributions to the field and indicate their potential”. Talk about the quality of the papers and the good aspects. The word “four” should be spelled out because it’s less than 10 (JGR style guide). If this is one of the good qualities for this candidate, it needs more detail: e.g., impact, speed, quality, leadership, external collaboration. This is a good place to highlight other good qualities about this candidate.

Particularly, Dr. Johnson, excelled at networking and presenting their work at conferences.

“Networking” can sometimes be seen as a negative, so this is a backhanded compliment, and could be replaced by “collaborating with peers in the field”. Furthermore, Dr. Johnson’s networking abilities need to be backed up by examples. For instance, did they start or expand a project based on conference interactions? Did they receive colloquium invitations?

Dr. Johnson presented their work at a number of national and international meetings, receiving three awards for “Outstanding Paper/Poster” Presentation.

This is a probably the most impressive thing on their CV and so it should be at the start of the paragraph – people are relatively likely when skimming to only read the first sentence of each paragraph, so don’t bury the lead here.

It is these type of interpersonal and public speaking skills that I believe will make Dr. Johnson into an outstanding researcher…

It would be helpful to add a more concrete example here of Dr. Johnson’s excellence at a conference and how it impacted students or pushed the field forward. Remove any references to your beliefs. Also, are they not already outstanding? We could frame this as “Dr. Johnson is an outstanding researcher amongst their peers, and due to their skills in communicating their science and collaborating with their colleagues.”

…albeit with some additional experience gained through this Postdoctoral opportunity.

This undermines the candidate and should be deleted.

In brief, Dr. Johnson is an above-average researcher that is compassionate and who has excellent interpersonal relationships with a number of colleagues in the field.

The adjective “above-average” is damning with faint praise, and “compassionate” is a female-coded adjective. The applicant’s compassion and personal relationships are not relevant to the application and probably wouldn’t be something you mentioned about a male applicant, so should be deleted. Replace with something more relevant such as “leadership skills, which have led to productive connections with external collaborators”.

Further, Dr. Johnson has overcome a number of different hardships relating to their gender at Technical College Institute.

This is patronising, irrelevant to the position, and should not be included.

These distinct experiences in conjunction with Dr. Johnson’s research savvy, makes **they** an ideal candidate for your Postdoc.

The letter has not provided any examples of their research savvy and this should be rectified. “Savvy” is too colloquial and may have negative connotations, so should be replaced with something like “expertise”. Lastly, “Postdoc” is too colloquial and should be replaced with “postdoctoral position” (uncapitalized).

Please feel free to contact me via email or phone with any additional questions you have regarding Dr. Alex Johnson’s application.

Sincerely,

Professor Jones

Technical College Institute