

References and Letters of Recommendation

The purpose of a reference or letters of recommendation is to allow the inquiring employer or institution a glimpse into your character. A letter of reference or recommendation assumes a relationship that goes beyond the mundane into a better idea of who you are and what you can do. As such, over 90% of organizations use some means (usually a request for a recommendation letter or a phone call) for checking references. Most employers and graduate school programs will expect you to have recommendations from a previous employer, associate, or instructor.

All applicants should have at least three references or recommendations available. For students graduating from college, the opinions or recommendations of your faculty and college administrators will probably be the most important. For those who have actual work experience, references will be sought from your job supervisors.

Be very selective when choosing references. If you have three good references and two are better than the third, drop the third one. Do not list anyone who might say, "He's good at..., but" All that is needed to eliminate you is one bad reference (even just one "but").

A good reference/"recommender" is someone who has firsthand knowledge of your performance in the classroom or on the job. Resume readers want work references more than character references. The best reference is the one who will say, "He worked for me and I wish I could hire him back."

Three references are plenty. Most employers will go to the trouble of phoning your references only after having made a decision to consider you seriously for a position, and will probably do so in an effort to reinforce their positive impressions. Do not rely on people whose opinion of you is less than clear, even if they carry considerable weight within the industry you are trying to enter. Using an industry "bigwig" as a reference will only help you if you know the person in question fairly well. Try to elicit recommendations from people who can honestly speak highly of your background, skills, accomplishments, and potential.

The process begins when you approach an individual who knows you well, and ask them if they would be willing to serve as your reference as you go about your application process. After this beginning, you will want to set up an appointment with your reference to acquaint them with your aspirations and help them develop a good sense of how they can help you if they are called upon by your future employers. This meeting is important because it gives your reference a feeling of confidence that they will be able to help you, and it lets you get a feel for how they will respond to potential calls.

What you do not want to happen is for a professor's only comment to be, "According to my records, John got an A in my class;" or for a supervisor, no matter how high up in your company, to not be able to recall who you are.

Following are suggestions to aid you in requesting letters of recommendation or selecting individuals who you will list on a reference page.

1. *Start a Reference File at Career Services:* A Reference File is a good place to collect your letters of reference from professors, as well as employers. Career Services can set one up for you and scan them into an electronic format for you once you graduate.

2. *Start Early:* Look for people who view you favorably and ask them for recommendations before they go on sabbatical, forget you, or even change their minds about you.

3. *Select Someone Who Knows You Well:* Identify individuals from: professors, past employers, supervisors of internships, supervisors of summer jobs, extracurricular activities, etc.

4. *Choose Writers Carefully When You Need Actual Recommendation Letters:* Assess the ability of your letter writers.

5. *An Ideal Recommendation Writer Will Meet Several of the Following:*

- has a high opinion of you
- knows you well in more than one area of your life
- has taught or worked with a large number of students and can make favorable comparisons between you and your peers
- has good communication skills
- is familiar with the organizations to which you are applying
- is familiar with the types of responsibilities involved in the position(s) for which you are applying

5. *Ask Appropriately:* Ask if he or she would be willing and has time to write a letter in the next two or three weeks. Recognize that professors and employers are undoubtedly busy and that writing a good letter will take one to two hours, so don't demand. If you detect reluctance, allow the writer to decline gracefully; letters produced unwillingly won't be of much value.

6. *Provide Background:* Make an appointment to discuss your letter and provide background about yourself. Before the meeting, assemble some material that you can leave with the writer. Include such information as a resume, job description or objective, responsibilities you will be asked to handle, outstanding papers you have prepared, and a list of awards you have received. The more specific the information you leave with the writer, the better. This will enable him/her to provide specific, concrete information about you and reflect a degree of personal familiarity with your work and achievements.

7. *Clarify the Letter's Purpose:* Explain how your letter will be used and who will receive it. Is it a general, all-purpose letter to any employer, or are you sending it to a specific company regarding an actual job opening? If you are applying for a specific job, tell your writer about the position and the company.

Make sure your "recommenders" also know the following:

- Who will read the letter?
- The date the letter is needed.
- How to contact you.
- Whether the letter will be confidential or not
- If you want a copy of it.

8. *Follow Through:* Be sure to write thank-you letters to everyone who provides a recommendation letter. Then let them know how you fared. Tell them if you got the job and how their letters influenced the decision. The feedback will help them write better letters in the future and will build a relationship in case you ever need another recommendation.

9. *Keep "References" Informed of your Plans:* When asking your references for permission to use their names, update them on your progress in school and your career aspirations. Always secure permission before you use someone as a reference. Tell your references exactly what kind of work you are seeking. Keep in touch with them as you hunt, enabling them to represent you better when an employer calls. References should always be on a separate piece of paper from your resume, see Career Services or the Resume Guide for formatting ideas.