

Writing References for Students

This advice is aimed at academic staff who do not have much experience of writing references for students or graduates who are applying for jobs or further study/research. It covers:

- what references are
- handling requests for references
- different formats for references
- advice on what to include
- legal considerations

What references are

The purpose of a reference is to:

- a. confirm factual information provided by a student or graduate in their application and
- b. obtain your personal opinion on the candidate's ability and qualities.

Basically, employers want your view of the student, usually in relation to the demands of the job or course, drawn from your direct experience of the student.

Some employers treat references as a simple check on the facts, others see them as an essential contribution to the selection process. However, your reference is likely to cover only some factors that interest the employer; you are not expected to know everything about your students. Remember, the employer sees your reference as additional insight; not the sole deciding factor in making a job offer.

Employers with established recruitment procedures for graduates will have clear requirements for the skills and qualities appropriate for the job and the working environment, and these may be made explicit in the reference request. If not, it is useful to ask students to provide some details of the job/course they have applied for, such as a person specification or the job advert/course details.

Requests for references

Students may approach you to ask if you are willing to be named as a referee on their applications, or this may be an expected part of your role, e.g. as a personal tutor. Sometimes a student may ask you to provide a general written reference, also known as a testimonial or letter of recommendation, which they can use to accompany any applications they make (see 'Types of reference' below).

The request for a reference will normally come from employers, admissions tutors or PhD supervisors, following receipt of an application, although sometimes you may be asked by a student to add a reference statement as part of their online application form before they submit it.

Requests could come to you by email or letter, with your reference to be returned by email or via an online form. Make sure to check the authenticity of the email address or website before submitting your reference. Occasionally you may be telephoned and asked to provide a verbal reference. In this case, we suggest that you arrange to call the organisation back to allow you time to gather your thoughts. Again, verify that the caller is who they say they are, perhaps by checking the organisation's website. See 'Reference formats' and 'What to include' below for more information.

Reference formats

Online pro-forma or 'ready-made' reference

This uses a form provided by the recruiter and the detail and length of these will vary. You may be asked to "rate" the student against certain statements or give your opinion on specified aspects of the student's skills or qualities. This format is helpful as it focuses on the attributes that are required.



Attached reference

This is a section at the end of the student's application form and passed on to you by the student. It can be a blank page or a set of structured questions. One advantage is that you see what the student has said and can reinforce the impression they are trying to make.

General letter

In this case the employer will typically ask for a 'frank confidential report', sometimes requesting your comments on specific points but often leaving you free to comment as you think appropriate. This gives you more control over the content.

Telephone reference

It is best to avoid giving information on the telephone as it can be difficult to verify the caller's identity and a verbal reference can be misinterpreted or not recorded accurately. If such a reference is unavoidable, limit your comments to factual information if possible. Only say something you would be happy to put in writing, and remember that you can refuse to answer a question, especially if it relates to personal data such as a health condition.

Open testimonials or letters of recommendation

These are sometimes used by students to send to employers, eg alongside a speculative CV they are sending to organisations. Letters of recommendation are generally seen as of little value by employers in the UK, but are common in some other countries. Therefore international students in particular may request these. It is helpful to clarify which achievements and qualities the student is aiming to promote, and what kind of work they are seeking, so you can make relevant comments.

Can I refuse to provide a reference?

Yes but it is unlikely that the situation would arise, as it's safe to assume a student would only ask you if they believe you have a good opinion of them. However, if you are approached by a student for whom you feel unable or unsuitable to act as a referee, help the student by discussing your reasons with them.

If you are asked to provide a reference by an employer and feel unwilling to do so, explain your reasons to the employer in a way that avoids implying a negative opinion about the student. Inform the student and again, clarify your reasons.

What to include

If you agree to being named as a student's referee, ask them for a copy of their CV and any other relevant information, plus details of their future plans. You can also use other information about a student from details held by their department, plus details from their HEAR (Higher Education Achievement Report) which details their academic achievement and any extra-curricular activities that have been verified by the University.

Basic content

- Verify the length of time that you have known the student
- confirm the course of study the student is on (or previously attended if graduated)
- indicate the class of degree achieved or expected. If 'expected', make this clear
- provide comments on the student's abilities, any work experience you know of, their career interests, and involvement in extra-curricular activities/interests
- where degree subject has particular relevance for the job or course, the employer or admissions tutor will hope for specific comments on technical or discipline-specific knowledge and ability.

Potential and personal qualities are important to employers. These are best demonstrated by things like:

- the student's performance and general approach to academic work
- relationships with staff and students
- use made of the opportunities afforded by university life
- how coursework has been tackled, e.g. the student's conscientiousness and reliability; their intellectual ability, creativity, or openness to new ideas; and how they have developed as a person
- behaviour at times of stress, e.g. how they have coped with constructive criticism.

Tips on good practice

- Only provide a reference following confirmation of the employer's identity
- explain to students how you handle reference requests and what you expect from them (see below)
- ask students to keep you informed of jobs or courses they apply for
- encourage students to keep their CV up to date and provide you with a copy
- consider having your own system for noting students' performance and behaviour
- respond to requests for references as quickly as possible
- provide references in the format requested by the employer
- try to use hard evidence and aim to emphasise strengths
- be clear when giving an opinion rather than stating facts. If in any doubt, use phrases such as 'to the best of my knowledge' or 'it is my belief'
- avoid unclear or ambiguous statements. Employers may not come back to you for clarification
- aim to be fair to the student and the employer
- keep a confidential copy of any references you write
- put the date on the references you write, and mark them as 'Private and confidential' when posting or emailing them.

Students should:

- seek your permission to use you as a referee
- keep you well informed about jobs applied for, providing a job description if possible
- provide you with a current CV or similar - for general background information
- *ideally* provide a copy of any application where you are named as a referee
- keep you in touch with progress, especially when a job has been offered or accepted.

Legal considerations

Legally, students have the right to ask the employer for an opportunity to view the submitted reference so it is safest to assume that the student will view the reference and therefore to write it accordingly.

The factual content of the reference needs to be accurate and you must clearly differentiate between fact and opinion. Legally speaking, it is possible that the author of a reference may be liable if there is 'negligence' in the compilation of the reference.

Do not supply any sensitive personal data without the written permission of the candidate. 'Sensitive data' relates to racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious beliefs, Trades Union activities, physical or mental health, sexual life, and details of criminal offences.

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