

FGSR Professional Development Career Development Module



Reference Letters

A reference letter is a letter of support or recommendation written by a previous or current employer, supervisor, co-worker, professor or other professional acquaintance.

Reference letters provide an additional way for potential employers to verify and assess your skills and qualities. They are also often required for scholarship applications.

These letters of reference are formal statements that speak of you to a third party; written assurances that vouch for the person whom you have portrayed yourself to be in your resume, your cover letter, and other types of written or verbal application.

Who makes a good reference?

A good reference is someone who has knowledge of your skills, personality and performance at work. An ideal reference:

- Knows you well in at least one area of your life (Example: Research, courses).
- Has a high opinion of you
- Has Good writing skills
- Is familiar with the skills required for the position or scholarship application.

What are some things that make a good reference letter?

- Action verbs used to describe you
- Positive comments about your contributions
- Reasons why you should be considered as an applicant
- Positive comments about your personality and character
- Your references' contact information

Tips

Requesting a Reference Letter

- Ask persons who know you, are familiar with your work, and are likely to write something positive about you including former supervisors, teachers, former employers, leaders in the community, and friends with influence in the community, among others. For some letters, the academic standing of the referee is important. Full professors may have higher impact than assistant professor and even more than a post-doctoral fellow.
- Ensure that the potential referee also knows something about the place to which you are applying and that they are also familiar with the norms of formal letter-writing.

- Avoid asking family or other relatives to write you a letter of reference. This is generally unacceptable except in rare circumstances where it has been stated that such letters are acceptable.
- Avoid submitting more than three letters of reference.
- Give your reference a current copy of your resume or CV and a copy of transcripts (if for a scholarship application). Check if unofficial transcripts are acceptable for the person writing the reference letter. Give your referee the job posting, scholarship application, grant information or website to help them know what type of letter they should write and what attributes they should highlight. The referee package should also include a pre-paid or stamped envelope with the address of the appropriate destination (either yourself or the location to which you are to forward your application).
- Let your reference know how many copies of the letter you require and the date you require the letter.
- Also let your reference know what to do with the letter. Should they give it to you in a sealed envelope or send it in the mail?
- Be specific about the skills or qualities you would like your reference to highlight.
- Give your reference 2-3 weeks to prepare the letter. This is important and it can be considered discourteous to request a letter of reference on short notice.
- Explain to your reference how the letter will be used, who will receive it and who will read it.
- Ensure your reference knows how to contact you.
- Referees tend to be very busy persons so they might forget to complete your letter. As such, try to follow up with your request if you have not heard back from your referee about 5 days before the due date. Note however, that 5 days is only a suggestion. Use your discretion to draw the line between following up in order to get your letter submitted in time and following up too frequently in a way that might bring discomfort to your referee.
- Be sure to thank everyone that provides you with a reference letter! You may need another one later. Once you receive your reference letter or your referee confirms (preferably in writing--by email for example) that he or she has sent your reference letter, write a thank-you note to him or her. You should subsequently inform your referee about the success of your application and how their letter helped in the process.

Writing a Reference Letter

- Ask yourself if you are the right person to be his or her referee by answering the following questions:
 - Am I familiar with this person's work to the extent that I could definitively draw conclusions (positive or negative)?
 - If I am familiar with his or her work, could I write a generally positive letter of reference?
 - If your answers to the two questions above is no, it is important that you diplomatically bow out of the task as early as possible. If your answers to the two questions above are yes, proceed using the steps below.
- Ask the candidate to provide you with a copy of his or her CV and/or resume and relevant info, such as awards, grant application, job posting. This will help you tailor your letter for the target audience.
- Also request a list of accomplishments and organizations to which he or she belongs. This way you learn more about him or her beyond your personal contact.
- Always remember that it is important to keep in mind that you can only vouch for those attributes that you have witnessed in your personal contact with the candidate.

- There is no single or specific way to write reference letters. However, like most formal letters, there are certain rules that are consistent across the board. For example:
 - Reference letters must be typed and printed on good quality paper— appearance counts and can influence if your letter will be read.
 - Your letter must contain your address (here, the use of an official letter-head might also be useful), the date, the recipient's address, and a title that consists of the candidate's full name.
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Other Resources

- Barkdull, L. (2007). How to write a perfect reference letter. Retrieved, May 2, 2007 from the WriteExpress Corporation website: <http://www.writeexpress.com/reference-letter.html>
- CAPS: Tips on Reference letters. <http://www.ualberta.ca/caps>
- WritingHelp-Central. (2007). Reference letter samples. Retrieved May 2, 2007, from the WritingHelp-Central website: <http://www.writinghelp-central.com/reference-letter-definition.html>
- Ernst, M. (2002). Requesting a letter of recommendation. Retrieved May 2, 2007, from Michael Ernst's home page on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) website: <http://pag.csail.mit.edu/~mernst/advice/request-recommendation.html>
- Templates for Letters of Reference on Microsoft Office online: <http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/templates/CT101471741033.aspx>