

References and Letters of Recommendation

Career Document Series

The term reference refers to:

1. A person who may be asked to talk about your skills, experience, and work ethic.
2. The actual written or verbal statement of qualification, ability, or character.

References—Business World

Historically, references were written and confidential. However, the business world for the most part has long abandoned written letters of recommendation and instead prefers a list of your references including an address, phone, e-mail, and the person's relationship to you. (See attached sample) A potential employer may call a reference and ask questions about you.

Letters of Recommendation—Education, Health Care, Social Services, Graduate School

Letters of recommendation are written evaluations of an individual's performance, whether at work or in the classroom. This information is an integral part of the world of education health care and social services. Communication of this information is necessary and appropriate. However, it is no longer necessary that these letters be confidential. You can gather letters of recommendation from your instructors, advisors, supervisors or anyone who has witnessed your academic or work ability.

Keep the original of these letters and make copies to send out with your resumes or application packets. This is known as self-credentialing. Ask letter writers not to address the letter to anyone in particular; simply put at the top, "Letter of Recommendation for <your name>." All letters should be signed and dated.

Teaching or administrative positions in higher education are the only areas in which letters of recommendation are expected to be confidential. In this case, career offices or academic departments will hold the original letters and send out copies for a fee. When applying to graduate school, you will have to supply written letters of recommendation that discuss your ability to be successful in advanced study. If possible, ask the writers to tailor each letter to the school or program for which you are applying. If you are delaying graduate school for a year or two, you can arrange with your career office to create a credential file for you which will hold confidential letters until you apply to school.

Choosing your references

- Be sure to ask individuals who will provide honest, candid, and positive recommendations.
- Select professional references. Unless requested, do not select friends to serve as "character" references. Choose people whom you have asked in advance to serve as references.
- When asking people to serve as references, give them a copy of your resume or list of your work experiences and activities. Ask them for advice or feedback. Talk to them about your career goals. This way, they are more prepared to talk to a potential employer in a helpful way.
- Remember that people have busy lives. If there are deadlines for writing letters or completing forms, be sure to tell your references. Check in with them if necessary. While doing so, be respectful and gracious of their other obligations.
- Always follow up with your references when you have accepted the position. Send them a thank you note telling them about your new opportunity.

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References

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