

GUIDE LINE FOR ASK AND WRITE A REFERENCE LETTER

I. What is a reference letter and when are they used?

A reference letter is usually written to testify to a person or (occasionally) a company's skills, character and/or achievements. Sometimes a reference letter is known as a "recommendation letter". It is a formal document, and should be typed and written in a serious and business-like style.

Reference letters are used in a wide variety of situations; there is no definitive list that covers all possible scenarios. The most common examples are:

- When a candidate applies for a job, they may need a reference to support their application.
- If an interviewee is given a job offer, they may need to supply a reference letter before the contract can be signed.
- A student applying for an academic course often requires a reference letter to support their application.
- A student applying for funding will often need to supply reference letters.
- Companies may use reference letters as testimonies to their trustworthiness and ability to carry out a job well.
- Prospective tenants may need to provide their landlord with a reference letter, testifying to their good financial status. (This could be from a prior landlord or from a current employer.)

Who should write a reference letter?

If you are approached and asked to write a reference letter for a job candidate, a student or a company, consider whether you can legitimately do so. A reference letter is a formal document, and it is crucial that you do not lie or fudge the truth in it, or there could be legal repercussions. If someone wants a reference letter from you:

- The candidate should be someone you know reasonably well. For example, you cannot provide any authoritative comment on the academic ability of a student who's only been attending your lectures for a week.
- You should know the candidate in a capacity which gives you the ability to write a meaningful reference. For example, if you have worked with the person, it would be appropriate for you to write a reference letter to a prospective employer for them.



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- You should be able to provide an honest and positive reference. If you truly feel that the candidate has no good qualities for you to emphasize, or if you have had a personality clash with them in the past, you should tell them to seek a reference letter from someone else.

To whom should ask a reference letter?

Ask for a recommendation letter from people who know you and your capabilities, i.e., former employers, teachers, coaches, community or corporate leaders, influential friends—people who have known you a long time. Relatives are not a good choice. Three recommendation letters are enough.

When write a reference letter?

Be sure to give them enough time (3-4 weeks, if possible) to write the recommendation letter

What goes into a reference letter?

The exact structure of a reference letter will differ slightly depending on the type of reference it is, but this is a good basic outline:

1. Start using the business letter format: put the recipient's name and address, if known, and address them as "Dear [name]". If the recipient is currently unknown (this would be likely on an academic application, for instance), then use "Dear Sir/Madam" or "To whom it may concern".
2. It is often helpful to introduce yourself in the first couple of lines of your letter. The recipient will not need your life history: just give a brief sentence or two explaining your position and your relationship to the candidate.
3. Your next paragraph should confirm any facts which you know the candidate will be supplying along with your letter. For example, if you are writing a reference for a job applicant, some or all of these details may be appropriate:
 - a) The person's job title, and role within the company.
 - b) The person's leaving salary when they were last employed by you (or your organisation).
 - c) The dates which the person was employed from and until.
 - d) If you are writing a reference letter for an academic course, you will need to confirm the person's academic grades.
4. In your third paragraph, you should provide your judgement upon the candidate's skills and qualities. It is often appropriate to state that you would gladly re-employ them, or that their contributions to your college class were highly valued. Single out any exceptional qualities that the candidate has – perhaps their drive and enthusiasm, their attention to detail, or their ability to lead.



5. Where possible, use your fourth paragraph to give a couple of concrete examples of times when the candidate excelled. (You may want to ask the candidate to tell you about any extra-curricular projects they've been involved in, or invite them to highlight anything they'd particularly like you to include in the reference letter.)
6. Close your letter on a positive note, and if you are willing to receive further correspondence about the candidate's application, make this clear. Include your contact details too.
7. As with any business letter, you should end appropriately; "Yours sincerely" when you are writing to a named recipient, and "Yours faithfully" when you do not know who will be receiving the letter.

Some tips

- Follow up your request for a recommendation letter by writing a review of your conversation.
- Give suggestions for your recommendation letter. You may need to put words in their mouths.
- When you send them the follow-up letter, be sure to include a self-addressed, stamped envelope.
- Then, feel free to contact them in a couple of weeks to confirm that they are aware of your deadlines.
- Once you receive your recommendation letter, send a thank-you note. Tell them about your success and how they helped you.
- Write only complimentary, yet factual, observations. Avoid unflattering or derogatory remarks. If you cannot do this, you should decline to write a letter of recommendation.
- Remember that potential employers are adept at 'reading between the lines,' and any negative implication may destroy a person's chance at getting the new job.



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