

# How to handle references

References provide job-related, personal, or academic information. You should maintain a pool of possible references in each of these categories from which to fill requests as they arrive. However, unless expressly requested, you should assume that no personal or character references are to be used. The information which such references can provide is rarely as task-specific as is the information from job-related or academic sources, and is often perceived as being less objective than that of the latter two as well.

**Before you ask someone to write a recommendation, assess the appropriateness of their serving as a referee, or:**

- *How well do they know you? Can they write substantive, detailed letters about your skills?*

All referees should know you well, respect your work, and be able to express this articulately in written form, or as is often the case in the business world, by telephone. Though many people may meet these requirements, it is important to choose those who can best provide information to fill each specific need. If your referees describe you in generalities, they could actually do more harm than good; potential employers may believe that vague comments veil a negative opinion.

- *Can they write positive letters?*

It is your responsibility to get a general idea of what referees plan to say in their letters, especially if you believe their evaluation may express specific concerns. Don't assume that you will receive a good reference simply because they agree to act as a referee. If you slept through class and handed in work late, it may well affect your reference. Ask first; even mediocre letters can have a harmful impact on your future.

- *Do they know specific details about the field you are seeking?*

One rule of thumb to use in differentiating between referees is to consider your audience: If you are applying for graduate school, the strongest references are those that attest to your ability to be successful in an academic environment, your analytical skills, and your ability to present information orally and in written form. On the other hand, if you plan to enter the job market referees who have a clear idea of the type and quality of work you have done or can do, and who can predict confidently how well-matched you are to a particular field are best. Such individuals should have specific, detailed knowledge of both your past work experiences and your general work behaviors (punctuality, dependability, initiative, etc.)

While your professors generally can provide you with the best source of references for graduate school, in most cases they are not able to provide your strongest job-related references. They may know your academic work quite well; however, they rarely have the opportunity to observe your work behaviors in a job-related setting, for forty hours per week for months at a time, in the same

manner that the best job references may. Furthermore, just as graduate schools prefer references from faculty, the business community ascribes the most credence to references from within the business community. If you choose to ask a faculty member for a work reference, to help improve their credibility, describe to them the types of skills valued in the field and remind them of your possession of those skills. For example, if you are interested in sales, even if they have never seen you on the job, their comments about your skills in persuasion during class discussion, ability to think under pressure, competitive approach toward assignments, and goal-oriented nature will indicate your aptitude for the field.

Again, the *best* references are those from people established in the field:

- Graduate school references written by faculty in the same discipline,
- Job references provided by former employers, especially if from the same field, and
- Professional school references from a mix of faculty and professionals in the field (for example, a medical school applicant would be well served by choosing two science professors and a physician whom the student shadowed for the summer.)

- *Do they have time to write?*

You should inform referees of deadlines and give them ample notice to meet them. They should be able to provide a realistic idea of the date the recommendation will be complete.

**Give your referees information to assist them in writing a cogent letter.**

Always ask the permission of your referees before using their names. Give them a current copy of your resume, discuss your career goal with them, and tell them what you hope they will focus on when providing the reference. Remind them of any work you have done for them which would help them to give a good reference. Notify them when you achieve your goal, and thank them for their assistance. They will be more inclined to provide a reference in the future. Give them:

- Most important, a clear communication of your intended goal. Graduate school statements of purpose work well; "something in business" is not specific enough. If you can't articulate your goals clearly to them, come to the Career Center for help,
- A resume,
- A copy of a transcript, and
- A copy of a research paper or other writing sample.

**If you submit a list of references, include details about how to reach your referees.**

Information which you should provide to employers includes each referee's name, job title, business's name, address and telephone number, relationship to you (e.g. professor, supervisor, co-worker,) the length of time they have known you, and if necessary the times at which they can be reached by telephone. Once submitted, what is done with the information depends on its destination. Many businesses check references only as a formality or to assist in final decision-making if they check them at all. Hence, your references may only be contacted if you have made it to "the final rounds," and you may never be asked for your references at all and still get the job.

*Job-related* references can come from the following sources (listed here in descending order of preference):

**Supervisors** - Immediate supervisors are the best reference of all *if* they liked your work, and if you worked for them on a full-time basis for at least three months, because they have specific knowledge of your work. Your boss's boss is acceptable only if he or she knew and liked the quality of work performed.

**Volunteer Supervisors** - If you have held a volunteer position and worked with the site director or coordinator, that person can serve as an adequate source of references, provided you worked enough hours for the coordinator both to remember you clearly and to have a good idea of the quality of work you performed.

**Co-Workers** - People who worked beside you and knew how easy you were to get along with, whether you pulled your share of the load, and how quickly you learned your job are acceptable references. Again, only choose those who had a good opinion of your work and who can give objective information.

**Faculty** - Faculty are generally skilled in writing cogent arguments (a recommendation is, after all, the argument that you would make a good employee) if they are provided with evidence in support of that thesis. They can serve as effective referees if you actually took classes taught by them, performing well enough for them to have formed a positive and lasting impression of you. They are best if their expertise lies in the field you plan to enter.

**Other Employees at the same site, frequent customer, etc.** - Only choose people from this category if you worked for them, or interacted with them on a professional level, as a significant part of your job, and if they can offer a perspective valuable to the field you are seeking.

**Professionals, executives, community leaders, clergy or counselors** - These people can serve as references because they are seen to have standing or positions of responsibility in society. They must be able to state clearly the traits you have which would qualify you for the job. However, use them as a last resort: They may be seen as being biased towards you because they are looking out for your best interests and not necessarily for those of the potential employer.

Graduate school references take the form of letters of recommendation submitted as part of the application, and are always checked and generally given considerable weight in the admission process. Most graduate and professional schools contacted by the Career Center in a recent telephone survey claim to read open letters more critically than closed ones. Therefore, if a graduate school's own forms enable you to waive your right to read recommendations, you should strongly consider doing so. However, if you do opt for a closed letter it becomes very important for you to ask about any concerns your referees plan to mention in their letters, or of their reluctance to write at all, so that you may select other referees if you prefer.

