

## Letters of Reference – A “How-To” Guide for Students

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**Letters of Reference** are one of the most common requests we as faculty receive from you as students, whether the letters are for jobs, admission to further education, *etc.* What is said in a reference letter is out of your control, but there are many ways to ensure the letters you request are as helpful as they can be towards to goal you have.

Before you ask anyone for a reference letter, answer these questions:

**1) What do you want your reference letter to say? What should it contain to help you get the position, admission, etc. you want?**

It's very important for you to think of the things the people receiving and reading the reference want to see. Is it academic credentials, interpersonal skills, extracurricular activities, relevant experience? It is essential you first decide on the attributes of your application you want included or highlighted with a letter of reference. If you don't know what you want, make sure you ask someone, either someone who has applied before, or has some knowledge of the position or place to which you are applying.

**2) Who do you know that can comment on the things that you want said?**

Once you know what you want in a reference letter, you need to find someone who can make that case for you, either through his or her own knowledge of you, or through subsequent discussions with you. If you would like your performance in a particular class highlighted, then ask that prof for a letter. But it is rarely a statement regarding your mark in a course that makes a reference letter useful – that is what your transcript is for! Instead, look for someone who can speak with some experience about your capabilities and attributes, as well as potential. This means you should think well ahead for possible references, if possible. Giving someone time to get to know you will lead to a more personal, insightful, and ultimately useful letter.

**3) Will that person be “credible” to the person, organization, school, receiving the letter?**

It is important to remember that your reference should come from someone who will have some credibility to the recipient of the letter; the person providing the reference should have knowledge of both where you have been, as well as some idea what is needed where you want to go. It is also best if their knowledge of you is recent. For example, your high school teacher may have wonderful things to say about your record four years ago, but can't really comment on how you have matured as a scientist and are capable of graduate research. Likewise, your university professors can comment on your academic credentials and promise, but may not be in a position to assess your capacity for teamwork (unless this was part of a course or other activity) or your ability to manage others. Pick references that can say something with authority about the things you want said! In many cases, this means you will need two or three references, with different experiences and insights into your background and potential.

## Asking for a Reference Letter

This can be the most traumatic part of the whole experience. But it is also important you do it properly to ensure the best reception and best response. Once you have identified your best candidates for references, the following steps should help:

**1) Meet face-to-face; if the person is busy, arrange a later meeting:**

Always ask for a reference in person, never by phone or e-mail, unless you are familiar enough with the individual to feel comfortable doing so. The best impression is made by having the courage to ask directly for a reference. Faculty members are notoriously busy; in fact, anyone in a position of responsibility usually is, so if they appear busy when you approach, ask for a time when it is convenient to meet with them for 5-10 minutes.

**2) Be prepared**

Have copies of all supporting documents your reference will need to provide a complete and meaningful letter of reference, *e.g.*, transcripts, resume, other evidence of achievement or initiative, and anything else you want highlighted in your letter. Also, make sure you have filled out as far as possible any evaluation forms from the organization to which you are applying, and provided a stamped and addressed envelope in which the letter can be sent.

**3) If possible, spend some time discussing your application and the requested letter.**

The reference may, in many cases, ask for further details on your background that arise from the supporting information you have provided, as well as anything else that you have asked her or him to highlight in the letter. Good reference letters take time to prepare, both through discussions with you and later in composition.

**4) Give your reference plenty of time to prepare the reference.**

Most persons you would ask for references have busy schedules, with a full workload besides the voluntary supply of reference letters. Be considerate to their work demands, and give them ample time (at least a week, if not more) to prepare your letter of reference. It may also be a good idea to follow up just before any application deadline to ensure the letter has been sent in time.

Finally, remember that many faculty members entertain numerous requests for reference letters, hence there may be times that we're simply too busy to do another. Also, depending on the position for which you are applying, the person you ask may defer and ask you to ask someone else. Don't take this personally; we know how important reference letters are, and due to time constraints or unfamiliarity with you or the position to which you are applying, may feel someone else would be more appropriate. We all want to see you succeed, and we want your letters of reference to work to their best for you. So should you!