FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT REFERENCES

Students and recent graduates often have many questions about references. What are they? When do I provide them? How do I ask someone for a reference? You’ll find answers to those questions here. While this information is geared towards general job and internship searches, much of it is useful for more specific types of applications, too. Certified teachers might also want to refer to our Reference Letter File Services. For those applying to graduate schools, we strongly encourage you to consult with the Career Services Center’s Graduate and Professional School advisors.

What is a reference? At some point during the job application process employers will likely ask you to provide references -- people who can attest to your skills, abilities, past performance, and qualifications for the job. These references may also be asked to provide the employer with information about your character, aptitude, work habits, interpersonal abilities, and other information related to your ability to do the job.

Who can be references? Former supervisors, professors, co-workers, colleagues, clients, and customers who will give you positive recommendations are appropriate choices. Avoid using family members as references. Make sure your references know you well enough to provide meaningful feedback. Before you finalize your list of references, you must personally ask if they are willing to give you a positive recommendation.

When should I identify references? Develop a list of references earlier rather than later. Make a point of meeting with professors, advisors, co-workers, and supervisors before you start applying for jobs. Demonstrate your excellent skills and work habits now by being active, engaged, and professional in classes, internships, clubs, at work, and while you’re volunteering. Develop relationships and stay in touch with potential references now so you don’t have to scramble later when you’re in the midst of applying for jobs.

Should I get generic reference letters from professors and/or supervisors that I can use with a variety of employers in future job searches? Many employers use their own forms or ask that specific issues be addressed in letters of recommendation, so generic letters may be of limited value in your job search.

Should I include references on my resume? Unless specified otherwise in the employer’s application instructions, do not put reference names and contact information in your resume. Do not state the obvious by including this on your resume: References Available Upon Request. Rather, prepare a separate reference sheet and submit it when it is requested.

How will employers ask me for references? It varies. Some will ask you to provide a list of 3-5 names with contact information when you submit your resume and cover letter. The job announcement will say something like "Include names and contact information for x-number of references". Other employers may ask for this information later on in the process. In any case, be sure to prepare a separate reference sheet with first and last names, titles (or your relationship), company names, phone numbers, email addresses and mailing addresses of each reference.

Occasionally, employers and graduate schools will ask that you submit letters of recommendation along with your application materials. It is usually your responsibility to contact your references and provide them with information about content, deadlines, and contact information. You should always ask the employer for specific instructions on this process.

When will my references be contacted? It depends on the employer. Some employers will contact your references early in the process as part of an initial screening. Others will contact references sometime before or after your interview. Ask the employer about the process because this is useful information to pass on to your references. Generally, you should not send reference information before it is requested.
How will employers contact and gather information from my references? Employers vary in their methods of gathering input. Discuss this with the employer early in the application process so you can alert your references and let them know what to expect and when. Employers may use any one of these options:

- They may mail or email your references a form to complete.
- References may be sent a link to an online reference form.
- Your references may be contacted directly by phone for a conversation to solicit information about your qualifications and suitability for the job.
- Employers may ask your references to submit letters of recommendations at the time of application, or after you’ve been screened and/or interviewed.

How do I ask someone for a reference?

- Always be polite and mindful that you are asking for a favor – no one is obliged to provide a reference on your behalf.
- Allow plenty of time between your request and the due date! A well-crafted recommendation takes time. Make sure you clearly state the due dates.
- Contact each reference using whichever method he or she prefers – in-person, email, and phone calls – everyone is different.
- Remind your reference of how you know each other. When and how were you associated? What projects did you work on? What classes did you take from them? Other details to jog their memory are always helpful (see below for more ideas).
- Ask your references if there is specific information that will be helpful for them in the process (see below for more ideas).

What information should I provide to my references? The more specifics you can provide regarding the job, the employer, your background, and deadlines the better. At the same time be respectful of your references’ time – be organized and brief! Provide them with:

- clear information about where (mailing address, email address, and/or website url), when, and to whom (first name, last name, title, and company name) the reference should be sent. If there is a particular form, format or website the reference should utilize, provide clear information about that as well. Do not make your references search for this information!
- your one-page resume geared to the job.
- a very brief summary of the job, employer, and/or qualifications sought (one or two paragraphs or a bulleted list). References need to know what you’re applying in order to provide meaningful recommendations.
- If the reference is a professor, provide a very brief academic summary (one or two paragraphs) which includes your GPA, W#, grade(s) you earned in their class(es), and/or a very short summary of the research, projects and/or papers you completed in their class(es).

How do I follow up on references?

- Be sure to check in with the employer to make sure they’ve received the information they need from your references. If they have not, don’t hesitate to follow up with your references.
- Send thank you cards/letters to your references. Keep them posted on your job search progress.