

The Careers Service is often asked for guidelines about what should be included in letters of reference.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

- Be specific and give examples to justify the points that you make.
- Request a CV or personal statement for additional information. This can inform your writing and enable you to be specific e.g. refer to anecdotes that back up points about a student's personality and ability.
- Raise the issue of references with students in class early in the academic year and clarify your / the Department's procedure for dealing with references.
- One page of a typewritten A4 page is generally sufficient - but do try to write more than one paragraph!
- Respond as quickly as possible to a request.
- Never lie! Do not make up anything or omit a glaring weakness. If you have any reservations due to lack of knowledge then this should be stated at the beginning of the reference.
- Students should inform you of the job(s) or course(s) they are applying for. The reader of the letter wishes to get to know the person better and you can tailor your give evidence of relevant skills, knowledge or experiences.
- If the letter is going to be negative, or overly bland, then tell the student who requests it in advance. The request may then be withdrawn.
- Some writers suggest that you avoid the gushing letter that only has positives to say and encourage you to write briefly about a weakness/area for development as it will give balance to the letter. Either way be comfortable with what you say.
- You can also follow the letter with a phone call. Do not substitute a telephone reference for a written one if that is what is requested.
- Be careful to avoid discriminatory references on issues such as age, gender, disability, religion, race, marital status etc.

GUIDELINES FOR STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE LETTER

- Identify the student and the capacity in which you came to know him / her - include your affiliation / relationship with them.
- Give as much evidence as possible of the student's increased knowledge or maturity, understanding of material or other aspects of development during the period you know them.
- Refer to the skills of the student. Examples available at <http://www.onetonline.org/skills/>
- It is important to be honest and factual - it would be better to decline to write a letter that is vague in tone.
- Providing details of relevant attitudes, abilities, competencies and personal attributes is also very important, for example:
 - Good oral communication skills
 - Enthusiasm
 - Degree classification, grades for modules or projects
 - Attitude to study and research
 - Problem solving
 - Good written communication skills
 - Personal / transferable skills
 - Work experience
 - Teamwork Numeracy
 - Business awareness
 - Leaving Certificate grades
 - Computing or information technology skills
 - Self reliance, capacity to work autonomously
 - Course content competency - specific technical skills/methodologies
 - Feedback on placement experience
 - Feedback on a year out

Avoid bland words such as nice, good, fairly, reasonable and satisfactory. Use active verbs such as: managed, liaised, undertook, oversaw, developed, applied, demonstrated, showed leadership

REFERENCE LETTER SAMPLE

Below is a suggested format for reference letters. The bracketed words are suggested options to use when applicable to your particular letter. See also the resources section below.

Dear [NAME OF EMPLOYER:] or [TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:]

PARAGRAPH 1:

If written to a specific employer: I am writing this reference letter at the request of [student] who is applying for the position of [job title] with your [firm, company, school, etc.]

If written 'to whom it may concern': I am writing this reference letter at the request of [student]. S/he has asked me to write this general letter which s/he may show to any prospective employer who asks him/her for references.

If letter is confidential: This is a confidential letter and should be shared only with people in your firm who are directly involved in the hiring decision. This letter should not be shown to [student] who waived the right to see the letter.

PARAGRAPH 2:

I have known [student] for [length of time] in my capacity as a [your job title] at [your employer]. If Applicable: [student] worked for me as a [job title]/ or [student] belonged to the [club or organisation] for which I served as an advisor/ or [student] took [number] courses from me, including [names]. [Student] earned grades of [list grades], respectively, in those courses. Based on [student's] grades, along with his/her [excellent, good, etc.] attendance and class participation, I'd rate [students] performance in my class as [rating].

PARAGRAPH 3:

[Student] has a number of strengths to offer [an employer, a graduate program]. (List qualities here, backing each one up with examples. Try to pick qualities that tie into the specific type of job student is seeking or requested on the grad school application).

EXAMPLE: [Student] often exhibited excellent leadership in my class, volunteering to lead groups and then organising the group's project quickly and efficiently. This attribute would serve [student name] well in the position of Assistant Manager with your company.

PARAGRAPH 4:

In conclusion, I would [highly] recommend [student]. If his/her performance in my class(es) is any indication of how she/he would perform [on the job, in postgraduate study, etc.], [student] will be a positive addition to your [firm / college, etc.].

Sincerely yours, NAME & TITLE

Material and letter sample is adapted from the Career Development Centre, Ohio State University

RESOURCES: Some good annotated examples from Brookes University

<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/student/services/handbook/docs/ref-postgrad.pdf>

<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/student/services/handbook/docs/ref-employment.pdf>

