

# References

## How To Get Great References for Graduate School and Job Searches



### Introduction

As you apply for employment or for graduate school, you will find that you will be asked to supply reference letters--usually three (3) from past employers (supervisors are preferable) or professors. Supervisors can speak to your work abilities and faculty members can speak to your academic abilities. A good balance would be to have two work related references and one academic reference. At one time these references or "credential files" were maintained by Career Services. However, in 1996 the credential services were discontinued following a national trend toward self-maintenance of credentials. This guide is designed to provide you with information on how to secure references that will be useful to you in your application process to schools or in your job search.

### Why Set Up A File Now?

Obtaining references before you graduate will assure you of a review of your accomplishments and activities that is fresh in the minds of your writers. Also, in the future, you may have difficulty getting in touch with your faculty, advisors, or employers.

### What Should Be In Your File?

Your file may contain as many letters as you like, but you are encouraged to send no more than 3-5 for any given job. Collect references from a variety of people who are qualified to comment on your present and past academic work, internships, and employment, including professors, advisors, supervisors, and co-workers. *Note: Family relations, peers, or personal contacts are not appropriate references.*

### Are There Special Forms For Reference Letters?

Career Centers have discontinued use of reference forms. Letters should be typed on the letterhead or stationery of the person writing the letter.

### Should The Letters Be Generic Or Tailor-made?

Some recommenders prefer to write a letter each time you need one. Individually tailored letters can be very helpful, and word processing makes this procedure somewhat easier. The advantage of having a generic reference ("To Whom It May Concern"), is that it saves you time and energy in tracking down your writers. You may need to leave the decision up to your individual recommenders. You may wish to have two versions of the letter: one for employment and one for graduate schools. Graduate schools will accept photocopied letters attached to their admission forms.

### Are The Letters Of Reference Confidential?

In accordance with the provisions of Section 438 of the Family Education Rights Privacy Act, commonly known as the Buckley Amendment, students have the right of access to their credential file and references. All references written after December, 1974, are assumed NON-CONFIDENTIAL unless a waiver is signed to the contrary. Each confidential reference must have its own waiver form (available in Career Services) attached to it. This signed waiver should be given to your recommender to be attached to the reference letter.

### Are Confidential Letters Better?

Many career development professionals recommend that you never give up your right to see documents being sent regarding your candidacy. It is important to have control over all documents which represent you. Most employers now call references for verification and clarification. Non-confidential letters have become an acceptable part of the hiring process.

### Should You Send Your Resume With Your Letters?

When sending your references it is always advised to include a cover letter explaining what it is you are doing. Including your resume with the packet is also advised to give them a written outline of your qualifications.

### What Letters Should You Send?

Career Services strongly encourages you to be selective about which letters you send for any given request. Some letters may be more appropriate than others for a given job or graduate application.



## Guidelines for Getting Great References

1. Ask for a reference in person. Make an appointment to meet your reference writer if possible. Ask your recommender if he/she feels comfortable writing the letter. Don't be reluctant to ask for letters.
2. When requesting references, remember that courtesy and consideration will help provide your recommenders with a favorable impression.
3. Keep your recommender informed regarding your job search. They will be a better reference for you if they know what is going on.
4. When you meet with your reference writer, identify the potential use of the letter of recommendation. Provide them with a copy of your resume, a listing of your skills and accomplishments (see SAMPLE: REFERENCE OUTLINE FOR FACULTY MEMBER below), and an outline of what you would like to see in a letter.



## Helping them Write the Letter

1. Ask them to explain their relationship with you and to make clear how well they know you and under what circumstances.
2. Be sure they know what your career goals and objectives are and ask them to tailor the letter of reference to a specific position or career field based on your goals.
3. Ask them to cover specific characteristics such as: scholarship, oral and written communication, motivation, leadership, sense of responsibility, ability to plan and organize, creativity, and tact and ability to relate to others. Ask them to give specific illustrations rather than vague generalities.
4. Experts agree that a page to a page and a half is long enough for most letters.
5. Ask them to use their business/organization stationery. The letter is much more impressive when typewritten on stationery with their organization's letterhead.
6. Ask them if they will volunteer to provide further information on the phone and ask them to include this in the letter.



## **SAMPLE: REFERENCE OUTLINE TO GIVE TO REFERENCE WRITER (FACULTY MEMBER)**

To: Professor Andrea Dorey

From: Janie Job Seeker

Classes Taken: Cell Biology, Fall 2013 (Final Grade: A)  
Genetics, Spring 2014 (Final Grade: A-)

### **Accomplishments:**

#### **Final Projects**

- Learned library research methods
- Acquired skills in reading and interpreting scientific articles
- Learned how to summarize and compare related articles

#### **Related Readings**

- Observed the importance of different research methods in studying genetic diseases
- Gained and appreciation for the time and work involved in research

#### **Lab Work**

- Experienced the complexity and monotony of research
- Applied techniques and information learned in lecture to actual situations

#### **Exams**

- Learned to think in a scientific (research oriented) manner bu using many different types of information to solve a particular problem
- Acquired study skills that emphasized understanding over memorizing

#### **Personal Strengths:**

Actively participated in class discussion

- Communicated ideas and opinions to others
- Learned from others's ideas and opinions

Attended all lecture and lab sessions

- Arrived on time
- Came prepared

Demonstrated interest in lecture and lab sessions

- Asked thought-provoking questions relevant to the material

Assisted other students

- Answered their questions and helped to explain ideas and concepts

Impression

- I learned about the complexity and importance of cell biology and Genetics and Evolution and how all three are related to one another.

## SAMPLE #2: EXAMPLE OF EFFECTIVE LETTER OF REFERENCE

# NSU

National Standards University  
123 United Blvd.  
Anytown, Florida, 32267  
(904) 555-5555 Fax (904) 555-5555

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November 1, 2013

To whom it may concern:

I am delighted to write a letter of recommendation on behalf of Florence Nightingale. I have known Florence for more than four years. She first came to me as a work study student to organize our year long career panel series while I was still Assistant Director at National Standards University (NSU). I would have to say Florence was one of the most thoughtful, thorough, and independent program planners that we had had at NSU. She encouraged us to pay special attention to such issues as minority representation as well as to produce a balanced and interesting set of events.

In 2012-2013, when I took over the position of Director of Career Planning and Placement for the All American University, I had no professional staff to help me in the rather large task of offering direct services to 1000 students and several hundred active alumni/ae. The first student counselor I hired did not work out, and I immediately thought of Florence. Although she already had a heavy work schedule at NSU in addition to being a full-student, she accepted the position here to handle a full range of professional responsibilities, including career counseling, workshop leadership, and materials design. In these and in all of her endeavors, Florence has demonstrated creativity, adaptability, and abundant enthusiasm. I must say I would have had great difficulty "surviving" my first year on this job without Florence's help and support.

Individual and small-group work with students and alumni enabled Florence to enhance her counseling skills. Her administrative capabilities have grown, too, as she has sought new responsibilities and assumed new projects. Her contributions to staff development and her suggestions relating to programming have been impressive.

As a colleague, Florence is very enjoyable. She establishes rapport easily with all clients and fellow workers. She has succeeded in creating enthusiasm among all who work alongside her. Her sense of humor and easy-going personality have been much appreciated.

Florence has also been involved in the organization, "American School Women" and has single-handedly kept the organization alive through a series of well-planned programs. She is currently planning a panel of discussion on "Women in Educational Leadership."

Florence Nightingale is an extremely capable professional who is ready to assume managerial and supervisory responsibilities. She has my strongest recommendation. If you wish to know more about this competent and energetic individual, do not hesitate to contact me at (617-495-3427).

Sincerely,



Ellen Patterson  
Director

### SAMPLE #3 : EXAMPLE OF EFFECTIVE LETTER OF REFERENCE

The University of North Florida  
4567 St. Johns Bluff Road South • Jacksonville, FL 32224  
(904) 555-0000 Fax (904) 555-0001  
November 19, 2013

Dr. Anita Hiresomeone  
Counseling Center  
Schultz Hall, Room 2121  
University of North Florida  
1 UNF Drive  
Jacksonville, FL 32224-2645

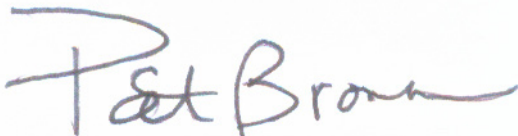
Dear Dr. Hiresomeone:

It is with great pleasure that I find myself writing this letter of recommendation for Janie Jobseeker. Janie is an outstanding employee who on a daily basis goes “above and beyond” in her administrative support to Student Government and continuously exceeds the performance standards for her position of office Manager. Janie willingly accepts new assignments and offers to help wherever she can. Student Government is a frenetic environment that presents many competing demands on the staff there. Janie remains steadfast in her cheerfulness, calmness, and dependability. She is an extraordinary employee and a vital member of the team in Student Government. Janie has demonstrated excellent managerial and decision making skills. She is attentive to tasks and works tirelessly to achieve the goals of the department. She is an extremely positive and dependable employee, and performs her duties in an extremely timely and conscientious manner.

I’ve received many compliments from the many students that she’s assisted as well as the staff members who rely on Janie’s direction. Management and personnel in Academic Affairs, Enrollment Services, and other departments praise her work. Janie is an innovative self-starter, who rarely needs supervision. She is punctual and typically exceeds expectations. She handles pressure well, and will voluntarily work overtime and take work home to meet a deadline.

Janie is an invaluable asset to any department, and I highly recommend hiring her as your new Associate Director for Student Affairs. If you’d like to discuss her attributes in more detail, please don’t hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Pat Brown". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "P".

Pat Brown

Don't let this happen to you. This is an example of a "BAD" reference letter. The candidate did not meet with the reference writer to ensure that he/she was comfortable writing the letter and was knowledgeable about the candidate.

OFFICE OF PLACEMENT SERVICES, COLLEGE  
18 Agassiz Circle, Buffalo, New York 14214

R E F E R E N C E

Date requested \_\_\_\_\_

Candidate's Name \_\_\_\_\_ Graduation Date 1/7/2

Curriculum Edison Ed.

Will you kindly write a statement concerning the personal, social and professional qualities of the above candidate to the extent that you have been able to determine these in your contacts with him. This statement will be used as a reference for prospective employers; in no case will it be shown to the candidate.

S T A T E M E N T

*is a student with a good deal of ability and a high degree of motivation. Her creativity and self assertiveness will make her a valuable teacher for any prospective school system.*

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_ DATE REQUESTED \_\_\_\_\_

OFFICIAL POSITION Assistant Professor DATE FILED \_\_\_\_\_

Please return directly to the Office of Placement Services, never to the person about whom it is written.