

REFERENCE LETTER WRITING 101

An effective reference letter could mean the difference between a candidate's acceptance or rejection. You may be a person requesting a reference letter, or you may be a person writing a reference letter. In either case, the information in this document can make both requesting and writing the letter easier. A reference letter is essentially the same as a recommendation letter but the reference letter is sent to an unknown employer, whereas a recommendation letter is sent to a known employer. Primarily, a reference letter is used to introduce a person and vouch for his integrity, character, and abilities.

Requesting a Reference Letter/Letter of Reference

Before you request a reference letter, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Ask for a reference letter from people who know you and your capabilities, such as former employers, teachers, coaches, community or corporate leaders, influential friends who have known you a long time, etc. Relatives are not a good choice. Three letters are usually enough.
- Be sure to give the people you ask enough time to write the reference letter—a week to 10 days should be sufficient.
- Tell the people who agree to write letters for you about your goals and what they could write that would help you to achieve those goals. Don't be shy. A reference letter is a sales letter that is intended to sell you. Now is the time to point out your accomplishments!
- Follow up your request with a review of your conversation in writing. In your letter it may be helpful to suggest specific phrases or sentences that the writer could put in your letter. When you send your follow-up letter, be sure to also include a self-addressed, stamped envelope. If you don't receive your reference letters within 10 days of your conversations with the prospective writers, you may need to contact them to confirm that each is aware of your deadlines.
- Once you receive your reference letters, send the writers thank you notes. You should also let each writer know about your subsequent success and how much their letters helped you to attain your goal.

Agreeing to Write a Reference Letter/Letter of Reference

Are you the right person to write a reference letter? If you are asked to write a letter of reference, you may need to discuss this subject with the requester. Can you honestly write positive things about the person who has requested the letter? If not, you should bow out gracefully at the beginning. On the other hand, if you feel you qualify, brainstorm with the requester so you can write what he or she wishes to be said, and be sensitive to his/her deadlines.

Have the person give you a list of accomplishments, organizations that he/she belongs to, or any other relevant information. It might surprise you to see how much

that person has done outside of your personal contact with them. This can also help you get a more accurate picture of the individual. Having the person give you a copy of his/her resume is an easy way to have this information at hand. Keep in mind, however, that you can only vouch for what you know from your own personal experience with the individual.

How to Write a Reference Letter

Here are some easy guidelines (in no specific order):

- Explain how you know the applicant and how long you have known him/her.
- In what respect is this person exceptional to others you have known with a similar background? List the applicant's exceptional qualities and skills, especially those that are related to the applicant's field of interest or job search. Give specific examples to back up what you have written.
- Refer to the requester's competency in a specific field and/or prior experience, organizational and communication skills, academic or other achievements, interaction with others, sound judgment, reliability, analytical ability, etc.
- Omit weaknesses. If you can't write a positive letter of reference, you should diplomatically decline when you are first approached.
- State your own qualifications. Why should the reader be impressed with your reference letter?
- Emphasize key points that you want the reader to take note of on the resume or application. Be sure to elaborate meaningfully; don't simply restate what he/she has already written.
- Unless it is absolutely relevant, do not refer (either in a direct or implied reference) to the applicant's race, religion, national origin, age, disability, gender, or marital status.
- Don't be too brief, but be succinct and make every word count. Generally speaking, a letter of reference for employment should be one page; a letter of reference for school admission should be one to two pages.
- List your own contact information if you are willing to receive follow-up correspondence or answer questions.
- Make the ending strong without overdoing it. Undue praise can be viewed as biased or insincere.
- Proofread! The letter of reference represents both you and the applicant.

Reference Letter Tips

Here are some additional things to keep in mind:

Appearance. Type your reference letter. Your reference letter casts a reflection on both you and the candidate. Appearance may even determine if it will be read or not. Print the letter on good quality ink-jet paper.

Specifics. Concentrate on several different aspects of the person. Be specific when you refer to his/her skills, attitude, personal attributes, contributions, performance, growth, etc. during the time period you have known the candidate.

Word usage.

- Be careful with "power words"! Some words that seem harmless in every day conversation can carry both positive and negative connotations when written and presented to a prospective employer. Here are a few positive adjectives: *honest, articulate, effective, sophisticated, intelligent, observant, significant, expressive, creative, efficient, cooperative, imaginative, dependable, reliable, mature, and innovative.*
- Avoid adjectives and adverbs that carry a mediocre connotation such as: *nice, good, fair, fairly, adequate, reasonable, decent, and satisfactory.*