



Careers Service

Writing References for Students

Many academics have experience of writing references for students but for some it will be a new and unpractised art.

Do references matter?

Yes; but their importance varies. Some employers treat them as a simple check on the facts, others see them as a valuable contribution to the selection process. Basically, employers want your view of the student, usually in relation to the demands of the job but drawn from your direct experience of the student. Your reference is likely to cover only some factors that interest the employer; you are not expected to know everything about your students.

Employers with established recruitment procedures for graduates will have a clear requirement for the skills and qualities appropriate for the job and the working environment and these may be made explicit in the reference request, job advertisement or employers brochure.

Potential is very important to employers and is best demonstrated by evidence of the student's performance, general approach to academic work, relationships with staff and students and use made of the opportunities afforded by university life.

Employers expect you to emphasise strengths rather than weaknesses. It is usual to provide an indication of how coursework has been tackled; persistence, thoroughness, intellectual ability, creativity, openness to new ideas and coping with constructive criticism for example. Where degree subject has particular relevance for the job employers will hope for specific comments on 'technical' ability and achievement. Employers are also very interested in the student's personal qualities; relationships with staff and other students, behaviour at times of stress or when faced with a challenge.

Employers usually assume the worst if comments are unclear or ambiguous and may not come back to you for clarification. Remember that the employer sees your reference as providing an additional insight; not the sole deciding factor in making a job offer.

By agreeing to provide a reference you are subject to legal obligations.

Types of reference

Pro-forma or ready made reference

Detail and length required vary. You may be asked to "score" responses or give your opinion on certain aspects of the student's skills or qualities. Advantage - gives you clues about what is required.

Attached reference

Often attached to the end of the student's application form and passed on to you by the student. It can be a blank page or structured questions. Advantage - you see what the student has said and can reinforce the good impression they are trying to make.

General letter

Typically the employer will ask for a 'frank confidential report', sometimes requesting comment on specific points but often leaving you free to comment as you think appropriate. Advantage - you have more control over the content.

Telephone reference

If sought from you - helpful to have some warning (ask the employer to call back) to allow you to gather your thoughts, being put on the spot can be awkward and you may not do your student justice. If offered by you (as a quicker way of replying to a request for a written reference) they are often unacceptable to an employer as they may not fit the system they operate.

Open references

To whom it may concern - generally perceived as of little value in the UK but usual in some other countries so may be requested by international students.

Can I refuse to give a reference?

Yes, but it is unlikely that the situation would arise as it's safe to assume a student would only ask you if they believe you have a good opinion of them. If you feel unable to act as a referee, for whatever reason, you can help the student by frankly discussing your reasons with them.

Accuracy and confidentiality

The following quote is from the University's Staff Recruitment and Selection Handbook.

'Case law (Spring v's Guardian Assurance - 1994) indicated that the author of a reference may be liable in damages to the candidate if loss is caused through negligence in the compilation of the reference. Therefore, the factual content of the reference needs to be accurate and the referee needs to clearly differentiate between fact and opinion. As a result, many referees are writing references with extreme caution and will limit their response to factual information only.'

Please ensure that disclosure of data in the form of a reference only takes place following confirmation of the employer's identity. Note that, under the Data Protection Act, students can ask the employer for an opportunity to view the submitted reference so it is safest to assume that the student will view the reference, and write it accordingly.

Finally, do not supply any 'sensitive personal data' without the written permission of the candidate. Sensitive data relates to racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious beliefs, Trades Union activities, physical or mental health, sexual life, and details of criminal offences.

Is the student applying for the wrong job?

This is the student's responsibility, not yours. Contain your remarks to the student's skills and qualities with reference to the demands of the job.

Good practice

Referees should:

- encourage contact from students
- explain how you handle reference requests and what you expect from them
- ask students to keep you informed of jobs or courses they apply for
- encourage students to keep an up-to-date CV
- consider having your own system for noting students performance and behaviour
- respond to requests for references as quickly as possible
- provide references in the format requested by the employer
- try to use hard evidence
- be clear when giving an opinion rather than stating facts - use phrases such as 'to the best of my knowledge' or 'it is my belief' if in any doubt
- avoid ambiguous or 'coded' references
- try to be fair to the student and the employer
- keep a confidential copy of any references you write

Students should:

- seek your permission to use you as a referee
- keep you well informed about jobs applied for, providing a job description if possible
- provide you with a current CV or similar - for general background
- ideally; provide a copy of any application where you are named as a referee
- keep you in touch with progress, especially when a job has been offered or accepted.