

GUIDELINES for WRITING a LETTER of REFERENCE

Letters of recommendation are used to gather additional information about a candidate. The letter should provide an overall picture of the candidate: personal characteristics, performance, experience, strengths, capabilities, and professional promise.

The exact structure of a reference letter will differ slightly depending on the type of reference it is and who it is for.

1. Use business letter format: If you do not know who to address the letter to, address to "To whom it may concern". KEEP TO ONE PAGE. The recommendation letter should be written in language that is straightforward and to the point. Avoid being too vague and general – use specifics and examples.

2. PROVIDE a brief sentence or two explaining your position and your relationship to the candidate. The writer may describe the type of experience, length, and time period during which he/she worked with the candidate.

3. Your next paragraph should confirm any facts which you know the candidate will be supplying along with your letter. If you are writing a reference letter for an academic course, you will need to confirm the person's academic grades, test scores or other facts about the candidate. SUPPORT HIS OR HER APPLICATION.

4. In your third paragraph, you should provide your judgment upon the candidate's skills and qualities. It is often appropriate to state that their contributions to your class were highly valued. SINGLE OUT any exceptional qualities that the candidate possess – perhaps their drive and enthusiasm, their attention to detail, work habits or their ability to lead. Dependability, patience, initiative, ability to get along, or creativity are also worthy. Try to single out their accomplishments and abilities amongst their peers. Make them stand out.

5. Where possible, use your fourth paragraph to give a couple of CONCRETE EXAMPLES of times when the candidate excelled. (You may want to ask the candidate to provide you with a resume, or invite them to highlight anything they'd particularly like you to include in the reference letter.)

6. CLOSE your letter on a positive note, and if you are willing to receive further correspondence about the candidate's application, make this clear. Include your contact details including your personal phone number.

7. As with any business letter, you should END APPROPRIATELY ; "Yours sincerely" SIGN.

TRY TO AVOID

- Mentioning any weaknesses the candidate has unless you turn it into a positive
- Comparing to past students if not the best
- Writing in an informal manner: keep the letter business-like.
- Including personal information not relevant to the application.
- Mentioning the candidate's race, political stance, religion, nationality, marital status, age or health is usually inappropriate.
- Spelling mistakes, sloppy writing or typos: this letter is hugely important to the candidate, and you should take care to make it look professional. Make sure the candidate's name is spelled correctly.

REFERENCE LETTER EXAMPLE

Date

To Whom it May Concern:

I am very pleased to recommend Martha Holden for admission to your university program. As her guidance counselor for three years I have watched this young woman develop both academically and personally into a mature individual ready in every way for her college years.

Martha is bright, energetic, compassionate and genuinely well rounded. Her grades have been consistently above average in all of her courses, and she has actively participated in a diverse assortment of extracurricular activities ranging from track and field and chorus to the school yearbook and our drama club.

Martha has also spent considerable time outside the school involved in the community. This has included work with Meals on Wheels and volunteering 10 hours a week at one of our area's shelters for battered and abused women.

They think so much of her at the shelter they have offered her a paid internship for next summer. Previously, this internship had never been awarded to anyone before the end of their college sophomore year. Despite all the preparations that will be required for going off to college next fall, Martha told me she is absolutely thrilled about this opportunity and feels it will enhance her university studies.

Unlike many students who are not sure which field to pursue, Martha has made clear to us all that her goal is to do Social Work. To this end she has worked tirelessly in our pilot program for mentoring Special Education students mainstreamed into our school.

In closing, let me take a moment to recount an incident which I believe speaks volumes about the superior nature of this candidate. Two years ago I was returning from lunch to my office when I saw ahead of me in the hallway 90 pound Martha, arms stretched out between two 180+ pound students, one a Special Ed student and the other a school bully. Other students were standing by motionless or laughing while Martha showed the leadership and courage to immediately put an end to the embarrassing fight that had erupted.

It is clear to me as I hope it is to you that this young woman, Martha Holden, is an exceptional candidate, one that would contribute greatly to any program. I wholeheartedly recommend her and wish her the very best in all future endeavors.

Sincerely,

If you are still unsure what best to include in the reference letter, imagine yourself in the position of the candidate's prospective employer, or of the panel reading his/her academic application. What information would they need to know? What qualities would they like their candidates to have? Obviously, you should never lie or mislead in a reference letter, but you should try to focus on areas which will give the recipient the most useful information possible about the candidate.