Writing references

A referee should be a tutor who has been involved in a student’s teaching or welfare. Otherwise senior staff members can give a factual reference using opinion only if it is supported by material on file.

- Encourage contact from students and tell them how you propose to deal with references.
- Suggest students keep you informed of jobs and courses they are applying for until they no longer require a reference from you.
- Set up a reference template (covering a few key points), if a student requires more than one reference this can be modified as appropriate.
- Store references in a confidential place and for as long as is appropriate depending on your relationship with the student. See the Data Protection Act and college policies for more.
- Aim to respond to reference requests as quickly as possible.
- Give the reference, where possible, in the manner it was requested from the employer.
- If you are unsure about your level of knowledge about the student, use phrases such as ‘to the best of my knowledge’ or ‘it is my belief’.
- Stick to the facts - ensure that all your comments can be supported by hard evidence such as exam results.
- Aim to make only positive points. If there are clear areas of concern, these should have been raised previously with the individual and formally documented.
- Try to verify that the reference is requested by a legitimate company. The student should already have warned you of its arrival; if not, double-check with the student.
- Avoid writing ambiguous or ‘coded’ references and don’t write a defamatory reference. This may lead to litigation.
- Be consistent in the amount of detail you give for each reference.
- Don’t refuse to supply a reference without giving clear reasons to the employer. Simple refusal implies a negative opinion.

Styles of references

Pro-forma. The length of the pro-forma and the amount of detail it seeks varies enormously from one employer to another. It might be a detailed questionnaire asking for comments on the candidate’s academic ability, positions of responsibility and participation in community life or a one-page questionnaire inviting referees to respond to a scale of above average, average and below average in areas such as academic performance and social orientation.

Pro-forma detachable from students application form. Some employers have application forms where the reference request is a detachable pro-forma at the end. This method is more common in applications for postgraduate courses. The student completes their part and then passes it on to their academic referee. The confidential part of the form may ask for the candidate’s predicted degree result and comments on a series of factors such as breadth of interest in professional matters and career potential. As the student is aware of the questions being asked, they may wish to discuss the form with you.
Styles of references cont...

General letter. Letters vary in the complexity of the information they request. Some are fairly specific and might enclose a job description or person specification asking that the referee comments on how closely the candidate matches those requirements. Other letters are left more open ended. If the request for information is too vague, contact the employer for further details.

Telephone conversation. Be wary of giving a telephone reference as verbal references may be misheard or misinterpreted. If a telephone reference is requested, follow up with hard copy as this will allow both parties to agree on what was discussed.

• Some employers telephone referees direct in order to obtain a more complete view of a candidate. Typically, the employer will use a questionnaire and checklist in response to the referees comments. Ask to be sent a copy of this for your records.
• Some employers will follow up the receipt of a written reference with a telephone call to clarify any ambiguous or problem areas.

Open testimonial. Although not common practice in the UK, some overseas students may request an open letter of reference for general use on return to their home country. The content of the letter is entirely for the referee to decide, but may cover points such as how long you have known the applicant, the start and finish dates of their course, something about their general attitude, commitment and motivation to their studies, whether they participated in any extra-curricular activities (to your knowledge), and what skills you believe them to have.

Example letter of reference

Dear Mr Smith,

Re: Andrea Blank (BSc Biology 2012)

I knew Andrea from October 2009 to June 2012 in my capacity as Lecturer and Tutor in the Department of Biology at King James College. During that time, she was an intelligent and conscientious student who consistently produced good work.

Her examination performance, course work and contribution to class discussion displayed her ability to integrate material and reflect a thoughtful and perceptive analysis of both conceptual and practical problems.

During her undergraduate studies Andrea displayed a wide range of interests. She took courses in Embryology and Microbiology and, in her final year, selected options in Parasitology, Neurobiology and Hydrobiology. Her work on her final year project demonstrated an ability to deal with the methodological and practical problems of research.

Andrea has an engaging personality and an outgoing manner which enables her to get on well with everyone with whom she is in contact. Whilst at college she played an active and responsible part in the life of the Department and elsewhere. She has good administrative and organisational skills and acted as a representative on the Staff Student Committee.

In view of her personal qualities, academic ability and her potential as an administrator and as a researcher, I have no hesitation in supporting her application to XYZ for a position in your development laboratory.

Yours sincerely