

Writing (Job) References for Students/Graduates¹

This document is intended to offer some helpful guidelines to academic staff who may be asked to write references for their students and graduates.

This text is offered as a source of useful information but it does not address any legal implications of providing references [...].

The purpose of references

References provide an opportunity for an employer to verify statements made by an applicant in an application form or at an interview. They also provide a relevant opinion that supplements and clarifies other measurements in the selection procedure, when assessing a candidate's suitability.

Opinion is divided as to the usefulness of references as most people will choose a referee who is likely to make positive comments, however, it is clear that employers still value them as an independent source of information on candidates. For many students and recent graduates, the academic reference is extremely important as a way of checking grades, consistency of effort, commitment and interpersonal skills and is often the contact preferred by employers. [...]

Who should provide the reference?

Ideally, the referee should be a tutor who has had significant involvement in the teaching [...] of the student. Where this is not possible, a senior member of staff may produce a factual reference, using opinion only when it is supported by material on file.

Good Practice Guidelines

- Raise the general issue of references with students, perhaps as part of a tutorial and ensure that they have accurate contact details for you.
- Suggest they continue to keep you informed of jobs and courses they are applying for until they no longer require a reference from you.
- Ask tutees to give you their most recent CV for your file.
- Create a basic reference document for tutees which can be tailored and amended as appropriate
- Work out a system of storing references and give someone responsibility for looking after them when you are away. Store them for as long as is appropriate depending on your relationship with the student. Refer to the Data Protection Act and any college policies for more information.
- Respond to reference requests as quickly as possible and if you know you will be away on sabbatical or vacation, advise an administrator or colleague of the location of your reference files
- It is acceptable to contextualise your comments e.g. in terms of the situation in which you knew the applicant, or even to use a disclaimer, such as 'to the best of my knowledge' or 'it is my true belief'.
- Wherever possible stick to the facts which can be supported by hard evidence such as exam results.
- When your opinion of 'soft skills' is requested e.g. ability to work as a member of a team, try to link your comments to specific situations which you have observed.
- Concentrate on the positive but offer an honest opinion. If there are clear areas of concern, these should ideally have been raised previously with the individual and formally documented.
- It is perfectly acceptable to allow the student to see the reference before you send it.
- Avoid writing ambiguous or 'coded' references – tempting though this may be on occasion. Always try to be fair to the student and the employer
- Defamatory remarks should be avoided as they may be classed as defamation of character and lead to litigation.
- Try to be consistent in the amount of detail you give about candidates and adopt a standard approach. Legal action can be taken if there is inconsistency in procedures.
- If you feel you cannot supply a reference, for whatever reason, give a clear explanation to the employer as a simple refusal implies a negative opinion.
- When sending a reference by post or email, you should mark the envelope or message 'Private and Confidential' to avoid any breach of confidentiality

2 Example letters of reference

(Please note this letter is simply an example and should not be regarded as a template. Academic staff will, of course, use their own judgement and knowledge in the construction of such a reference.)

Dear Mr Jones,

I knew Peter Lakefield in my capacity as personal tutor from 2005 to 2008 in the Humanities Faculty of the University of Nottingham. From my knowledge of him during this period, he was a conscientious student, who consistently produced good work and achieved high grades.

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

During his undergraduate studies, Peter took a range of modules including Film and Culture, Linguistics, Communication Theory and various literature studies. He also undertook an introductory course in Russian. Peter's final year dissertation demonstrated his ability to use independent research methods and to communicate in a thoughtful and creative manner.

Peter has an engaging personality and an outgoing manner which enables him to get on well with his peers and tutors. He made the most of his time at university through involvement in student societies and by taking on Hall and Departmental committee responsibilities. Peter was also keen to gain relevant work experience during his degree studies and I know that he was successful in obtaining an internship with a publishing company in London last summer. This experience would seem to be particularly relevant to the position you are advertising.

In view of his personal qualities, academic ability and proven communication skills, I have no hesitation in recommending Peter to you as an employee.

Yours sincerely

Dear Mr. Bann

I have known Jessica from 2004-2008 in my capacity as senior lecturer in the Sociology department at the University of Strathclyde.

Jessica attended classes which I taught from first year up until her final year which ended in June. She studied a range of modules which I taught, including Research Methods in Sociology, Communities, Citizenship and Culture, and Environment and Society. Jessica earned 65%, 64%, 65% and 67% respectively in these modules - 2.1 class grades. Her attendance was excellent and she was always an active participant in each seminar, often leading discussions and formulating interesting opinions and theories. When Jessica was asked to lead a seminar as part of her assessment, she had a confident manner and clear speaking voice and was able to disseminate difficult concepts in a way that ensured audience members could grasp them.

In my opinion, Jessica has an array of strengths to offer an employer. She demonstrated excellent organisational skills, always handing in her well-written work on time or early. Her ability to lead successfully was shown each time she volunteered to be team leader of a research group and she was able to solve any problems encountered quickly and effectively while listening to others. She is a friendly individual who is bright and motivated and always willing to learn and develop.

In conclusion, I would highly recommend Jessica for the position of Marketing Manager. If her performance at Strathclyde is an indication of how she would perform in the job, I believe she will be a very positive addition to Benoit Marketing.

Yours sincerely