

# References

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# What are References?

References are individuals that can speak to prospective employers and vouch for your merits. They help employers verify the information you've provided to them, and answer questions the employer may have about your skills, talents, work ethic, and character. When a company requests your references, they are looking for people who are able to speak about your work performance, your ability to meet deadlines, your inquisitiveness, dependability, ability to contribute to a team, etc. A serious candidate for any job opportunity should be ready with at least three professional references. Five is preferable, but not always possible for a college student or recent graduate. Ideal candidates for professional references usually meet two criteria:

1. They should be in a position to know the answers to a prospective employer's questions.
2. They should have positive things to say about you.

## Reference Guidelines

1. **Select your references carefully!** Remember the two criteria. The first criteria can be met by focusing on people that are in positions of authority that you have directly interacted with: current and former supervisors, professors, etc. Colleagues – individuals you have worked alongside with – may be acceptable but their opinions carry far less weight with recruiters (especially since your "colleagues" are probably just as young and inexperienced as you). The second criteria seems obvious, but countless prospective employees have killed their candidacies by relying on references that didn't think as highly of them as they thought they would! Don't be afraid to ask what they plan to say about you.
2. **Never surprise your references!** After you've selected them, contact them and ask their permission to be used as references. Tell them what you need references for (a job search, graduate school admissions, etc). If it has been a while since you have talked to them, update them on what you've been doing, and confirm their phone number, email and mailing address, and preferred method of contact. If a call from a prospective employer is eminent, contact your references to remind them they're acting as your references and to notify them of who they can expect to hear from. If an employer calls a reference and the reference isn't prepared, it will reflect badly on both you and your reference, who probably won't be interested in helping you anymore.
3. **Never list references on your resume.** They should always be on a separate document that you should only offer at the end of an interview (although an employer may require it earlier). The only name should be on your resume is your own.
4. **Respect your references' time.** Make sure they are not receiving too many calls.
5. **Stay in touch!** Keep your references informed of the developments in your career so they know what they're talking about when someone asks about you, and be sure you're aware of what's happening with their own careers. Be absolutely sure you always have their latest contact information.
6. **Don't forget to send a thank you letter!** Courtesy is important, and if you don't acknowledge the favor your references are doing for you the next time someone calls them they might not have as many nice things to say about you.

# Vanessa Jane Sotoreski

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## Professional References:

### **Antoine Brown**

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# What are Letters of Recommendation and Reference?

A **recommendation letter** or **letter of recommendation** is a letter in which the writer assesses the qualities, characteristics, and capabilities of the person being recommended in terms of that individual's ability to perform a particular task or function, or excel in a certain environment or role. Recommendation letters are almost always specifically requested to be written about someone, and are therefore addressed to a particular requestor and usually tailored to the needs of the addressee.

A **reference letter** or **letter of reference** is a letter in which the writer makes a general assessment of the qualities, characteristics, and capabilities of a person, or confirms details about that individual's situation or circumstances. Reference letters are different from recommendation letters in the sense that they are usually more general in nature and are not normally addressed to a specific requestor. Normally, letters of reference are addressed as; "To Whom It Concerns" or "Dear Sir/Madam."

Letters of recommendation and reference go a step further than simply having references. When a potential employer contacts one of your references, what they learn about you is limited to whatever questions they ask. A reference might have some wonderful things to say about you, but if the employer doesn't ask the right questions, the reference might never have an opportunity to bring it up. A written letter allows the reference to talk about whatever they feel someone should know about you. Letters of reference are usually an optional extra step taken by an applicant, but letters of recommendation may be required as part of an application to graduate school or certain highly-selective employers. When these letters are required, the organization may provide their own paperwork. Otherwise, they should always be typed on the letterhead of the organization where your reference is employed, and follow the proper format for a business letter.

## GETTING LETTERS FROM YOUR REFERENCES

**Who to ask?** You should select carefully who you request letters from. It should be someone you're willing to use as a reference, but unless multiple letters are required, you will probably only be able to submit one so you should be very selective. The person you select should meet several criteria:

1. **Comfort Level.** Don't put someone on the spot, just because someone will be a reference doesn't mean they'll be willing to write you a letter. If someone doesn't seem to be comfortable with writing a letter for you, don't pressure them. The letter could do more harm than good and you may end up losing them as a reference entirely.
2. **Written Communication Skills.** If the letter isn't clear, concise, and professional, it won't help you and could harm your reputation. In some cases you can check the letter yourself to be sure it looks good, but not always...graduate school applications often require that you provide your references with stamped addressed envelopes, so they can send their letters without you ever seeing them. Select individuals who's writing you can trust, and remember that's not always the best verbal communicators or most accomplished professionals.
3. **Familiarity With You and Your Work.** The reference should be able to personally vouch for your character, and should be able to cite specific examples of the work you have done or the tasks you perform that demonstrate your professional skills and credentials.
4. **Authority.** For a letter of reference or recommendation, your reference should be someone in a position of authority who's opinion will be respected. Colleagues and co-workers won't cut it.

**When to ask?** Right away! Letters of reference usually aren't tailored for a particular recipient, so the best time to ask for one is as soon as possible. If you're getting one from the supervisor for your Summer Co-op, the time to ask her for a letter is when she still remembers all the fantastic work you've done. If you need a letter from your professor, it's important to ask right away as you don't know how many other students may make the same request.

Letters of recommendation usually must be tailored for a particular recipient, so you usually can't ask for one until you've already selected a company or program to apply for. Once you've made a decision, you should ask for your letters as soon as you can so your references have as much time as possible to prepare.

**How to Ask?** For starters, don't even think about sending an email.

Asking for letters should be handled in a professional manner. If you're requesting a letter from a professional contact, call them on their business phone (hint: the best time to reach people in the office by phone is before 10:00am, before their workload starts to pile up). Ask them if it's a good time to talk for a few moments and offer to set up a later appointment if they say they're busy. If you're requesting a letter from a professor, don't ambush them before or after class. Make an appointment to see them, that's what their office hours are for.

1. **Be direct, but be very tactful.** Try to lead in to the conversation, but don't beat around the bush as this may make you appear timid and unsure of yourself. On the other hand, you shouldn't just blurt out "Can you write me a letter?" as this won't look much better. "I'm starting to apply to entry-level positions. Do you feel you know me well enough to write me a letter of reference?" is a much more appropriate way to ask, and also highlights that you don't want a letter from just anybody.
2. **Gauge their reaction.** If they don't seem comfortable with the request, back off...even if they said yes. An unenthusiastic letter is the last thing you want.
3. **Make it easy for them.** Give them a copy of your resume or CV. Show them a description of the job you're pursuing or provide information about the academic program you're applying to. Ask if there's anything more you could provide that would be helpful.
4. **Be prepared.** Your references are personally vouching for you. Review your qualifications and be ready to tell them what makes you so qualified for whatever they're recommending you for. If you don't know what you're talking about and can't impress them, how can you expect them to put their reputation on the line for you?
5. **Avoid writing it for them.** Some contacts might agree to sign a letter of reference if you write it for them as a timesaver. This usually is not recommended, as recruiters and admissions officers that review large numbers of applications can often tell. If this is the only way to get a letter from a valuable and highly respected contact, you may have to do what's necessary but try to avoid it as much as possible. Ask if there's anything you can provide that would make it quicker and easier for them to write it themselves, and if you have another equally-valuable contact you might consider asking them, instead. With letters of recommendation, writing it for them may not even be possible depending on the requirements of the addressee.
6. **Be courteous.** Always remember that you're asking for a favor.
7. **Follow the rules.** Some institutions and organizations have very specific rules restricting when and how managers and faculty provide letters of recommendation and reference. Make sure you know them first, and never put a professor or supervisor in an uncomfortable position by asking them to do something for you that's against protocol.