

References and Recommendation Letters

Trachtenberg School
Career Development Services
Career Guide

MPA Suite 601
www.career.tspppa.gwu.edu
tscareer@gwu.edu

Trachtenberg School
of Public Policy
& Public Administration

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Career Guide

References and Recommendation Letters

Table of Contents

References and letters of recommendation

References and letters of recommendation	2
Selecting a recommender	2
Information to provide your recommender	3

Letters of recommendation

Additional information to provide your referee	4
Drafting a letter of recommendation	5
Outline for a well-structured letter	6
Sample letter of recommendation	7
Sample fellowship recommendation	8

References and Recommendation Letters

A reference or a letter of recommendation provides a potential employer, fellowship or degree program with more information about you.

Colleges and graduate schools usually require letters of recommendation during the admissions process, as do many fellowships; potential employers usually request a list of references that they can contact to ask about you.

A letter of recommendation is a written reference designed to offer information about your character and work ethic. A list of references is a list of people (often former supervisors or professors) who know about your work and can offer more perspective than an interview can about what you are like as an employee. Potential employers may contact references by email or telephone.

Selecting a recommender

How do you choose whom to ask for a letter of recommendation or reference?

Remember that a recommendation anyone makes for you puts the reputation of the recommender on the line.

- a. Select a recommender who knows aspects of your skills, abilities and experience that are relevant to the position/fellowship for which you are applying.
- b. If possible, select a recommender whom you have kept informed of your progress over some period of time (holiday greetings, periodic email updates/check-ins).
- c. Select a recommender whom you believe agrees with and will support your chosen course of action (see (b) above). Ask them (see (e) below) for their perspective on your course of action. This will give you an idea of how supportive they can be.
- d. Particularly for letters of recommendation, make sure your recommender has enough advance notice and enough time to prepare a good letter of recommendation. (Keep their calendar in mind as well as your own – holidays and exams/grading periods are not good times for writing letters of recommendation.)
- e. Send an advance email or make a brief phone call to ask your recommender for a reference or a letter of recommendation.
 - Tell them what is involved with this specific position. For example, listing their name and contact information; answering a call or email from a potential employer; writing a letter of recommendation due to be submitted by a specific date; filling in an on-line recommendation form.
 - BE ADVISED: On-line recommendation forms are the least flexible, most burdensome and time consuming for your recommender, and give the least opportunity for your recommender to fit their recommendation to your particular capacities and situation.
 - DO NOT expect the recommender to sort out the on line process. Lay it out for them, for example: "You will receive an email from XYZ asking you to log on to ABC website and fill out a form. I will send you a hard copy of the form so you can see what is required."

Information for your recommender

What information does your recommender need from you?

The general rule is to **MAKE IT EASY** for the person to whom you are sending your request for a reference/recommendation.

- a. Once someone agrees to provide a reference or letter of recommendation for you, follow up your initial inquiry with information about the opportunity to which you are applying, and your suitability for it. If you are requesting a letter of recommendation, this should be a detailed email (see next page). For a reference, a conversation or an email is fine. Make sure you tell your reference anything you know about when, by whom, and how he or she can expect to be contacted, as well as the employer, the position and your suitability for it. You may find that you contact a reference several times as you apply to more positions.

This type of information lets the recommender know that you aren't just "shooting in the dark". Also, for a letter of recommendation, the referee will be able to draw on the statements from your letter to write the letter of recommendation, adding their appraisal of your suitability or special qualification for the fellowship or job.

- b. **After it is all over send the recommender an email or thank you note to let them know the outcome.** It helps keep them updated on your situation in case you need help in the future, and it's just the polite thing to do.

Why is it important to organize information for a referee writing a letter of recommendation?

Every time you ask for a letter of recommendation, you (and many others at the same time) are asking a LOT of time of the referee. Writing several letters of recommendation for ONE student to SEVERAL different graduate institutions, for example, can take 6-8 hours, especially if your referee must research his or her files for your grades and your research papers.

A referee can sometimes use the same basic letter, but each one must be tailored. It is easy to mistakenly put a letter of recommendation for one institution or program into the envelope addressed to another, or forget to change the address to match the institution to which the letter of recommendation is going. Institutions and selection committees do receive letters of recommendation for Fellowships that were directed to the wrong program. This tells the selection committees that the applicant is pursuing other options as well, and makes the selection committee wonder how serious the applicant is about their program. **Do everything possible to organize the papers and necessary information for your referee.**

What additional information does a referee need to write a letter of recommendation?

In your follow-up email to your referee, include:

- i. your resume, and if necessary or desirable any other pieces of paper that illustrate why you are a good candidate, for example, a research paper or a report on a related summer internship, as attachments
- ii. first paragraph stating what you want to apply for (name of Fellowship or position only), why you are asking them specifically for a letter of recommendation or reference and that you hope they would be willing to recommend you (basically, a short reiteration of your initial phone call or email).
- iii. a paragraph describing fellowship, the required qualifications, and the deadline for the letter of recommendation if you are requesting a letter of recommendation. If you think the recommender may not be familiar with the organization, include a sentence about what the organization is/does. DO NOT simply send an email with a link to a website, and refer your referee to the site. It is time consuming for your recommender to go through the site to locate the core of the opportunity for YOU. You should do that abstracting/summarizing in your letter. You can indicate a website "for further info."
- iv. one to two paragraphs on what your career or educational goals are and how the fellowship or job will help achieve them, as well as any other reasons why you specifically are a good candidate and how you meet the fellowship's or job's requirements.
- v. a final paragraph with the details of the letter of recommendation submission process or what your referee should expect. Does the referee return the letter of recommendation to you (in sealed, signed envelopes?), submit it on-line? etc. Provide submission forms and if necessary, stamped, addressed envelopes.
- vi. a sincere thank you and statement that you will call/email to follow up in a few days.

Call or email the referee to follow up. Ask them if they received your email and what they think about this fellowship or position and how it fits your goals. Have a conversation. This communication may be longer or shorter depending on the content of your initial email exchange or phone call to your potential recommender. The key is that the recommender needs to feel they know you well enough to make an honest appraisal of you and the appropriateness of the fellowship or job for you in particular.

Drafting a letter of recommendation

Why Ask Someone to Draft or Outline their own Letter of Recommendation?

It is very common for referees to ask someone to draft or outline their own letter of recommendation. Sometimes a referee will write it entirely themselves but other times they will use the draft or outline you provide as a basis and then add, delete, and edit the information from there. A referee may think very highly of you, and still ask for you to draft your own letter of recommendation to make sure he doesn't leave out your important qualifications because he is busy.

If your referee does not ask for a draft or outline of the letter of recommendation, you should still provide them with the information listed above for letters of recommendation. If they ask for a draft or outline, write a version of the letter that they could submit, although they may edit it. Letters of recommendation vary widely in content and form, but solid letters contain a number of common traits.

Remember: If you need five versions of the letter (say, for five different graduate programs), you don't necessarily need to write five separate letters. Application forms usually request the same type of information, and you simply need to create variations based on a template.

MAKE A LIST - Write down a list of key phrases -- accomplishments and qualities -- you want to address within the letter. Such a list will help you avoid the most common mistake made in these letters: vague, metaphoric writing. You want to provide concrete, convincing evidence.

THINK ABOUT AND EVALUATE YOUR:

1) Professional/Academic Qualities

- Are you an effective leader, a visionary and forward thinker?
- Do you function as an active participant in a team setting?
- Are you a keen analytical thinker?
- Are you capable of conducting sophisticated research?

2) Specific Skills

- Do you communicate constructively, consistently and concisely?
- Do you have strong interpersonal or presentational skills?
- Fluency in certain languages?
- Digital or social media experience?
- Are you technologically savvy?
- Are you organized with meticulous attention to detail?

3) Personal Qualities

- Do you work well collaboratively with others?
- Are you flexible? Adaptable to change?
- Do you possess honesty/integrity/morality?
- Are you a highly motivated self-starter?
- Are you responsible, reliable, dependable?

4) Past Accomplishments

- What are the principal two or three accomplishments you have achieved under this person's guidance?

5) Future Potential

- What do you believe you are capable of achieving?

Outline for a Well-Structured Letter That Covers All Main Points:

INTRODUCTION

Begin the letter by clearly stating referee's position, where they work, their relationship to you, and how long you have known and/or worked with one another (what context) and general "thesis" statement regarding your abilities/suitability for position.

Give a general impression of yourself (as your referee) specific information on you and why you are qualified, what you can contribute, and why your referee is providing a letter of recommendation.

BODY

State your most noteworthy quality as it applies to this program or job position, and support that claim with a specific anecdote. How your skills match the position and target your letter of recommendation accordingly

- **For instance**, you might say that Sarah is, first and foremost, a born leader; Support that statement by telling a brief story about the time Sarah took the initiative to form a policy task force to deal with a glitch in the company's computer system.

Include additional relevant and compelling traits and back them up by offering examples that clearly illustrate these qualities.

CONCLUSION

State why you think your plans suit you (as your referee) and how you think you will contribute to the program or company.

Strongly reaffirm your confidence in your abilities (as your referee) and conclude by telling the readers they should feel free to contact you (the referee) in case they need more information. Don't forget to include their contact information beneath your signature and name.

NOTES ABOUT THE FORMAT AND LENGTH:

Do not handwrite the letter; type it or submit it online.

Remember to have the referee also include complete contact information.

The length of letters of recommendation varies greatly, but five paragraphs is usually the norm.

On the same note, don't go overboard and churn out seven pages. Choose your content wisely, and remember that a concise letter is usually more effective than an overly verbose one.

Sample Letter of Recommendation

Dear Selection Committee,

When I think about a student who best exemplifies leadership and a commitment to socially responsible management, Robert Spector is at the top of the list! Robert immediately and consistently has impressed me with his maturity, vision and personal sense of responsibility about making an impact in the world.

During one of our first meetings, Robert talked about how he came to the Heller School to become the Executive Director that he never had in his past work experiences. He had originally imagined himself returning to the non-profit field in this capacity but now through his academic coursework, leadership roles with Net Impact and expanded awareness of the shifting delineation between the public, private and non-profit sectors, his vision of his future is very different. There is such an animation in Robert's face when he talks about Social Enterprise and its current and potential global impact – it's like he has discovered a whole new way to look at the world and his role in this world. It's always tremendous to see a student with such personal introspection, willingness to challenge himself and the ability to shift perspectives.

With his seven years background in the nonprofit sector, including marketing, fundraising, program management, and external relations at a diverse range of agencies, Robert brings a depth of experience and understanding to the MBA program; however, that is not what impresses me most about Robert. It is the manner with which he works to take initiative, problem solve and collaborate with students, faculty and staff. Robert has that unique capacity to balance experience, knowledge and emotional intelligence in a style that makes people want to be a part of his team. What a wonderful trait!

Based on all of this and more, I highly recommend Robert Spector for this opportunity and truly look forward to seeing what impact he continues to have in this world!

Best regards,

Angela Finley
Director
Career and Student Services
111-333-3333; AFinley@brandeis.edu

Sample Fellowship Recommendation

To Whom It May Concern:

It gives me great satisfaction to recommend John's Simons for the McKenzie Fellowship in Specialized Journalism. I was John's professor in three undergraduate Communications courses and worked closely with him at both our college radio station and campus video center.

Like a number of my former students, John has kept in touch. Through his letters I stayed abreast of his television news career in Sacramento and witnessed his development as a professional journalist.

It came as a wonderful surprise last year when John announced his intention to return to school for his master's degree. Knowing John I am sure he has exhibited the same enthusiasm for his graduate studies as he did with us.

John is highly charismatic and has a terrific on air presence. More importantly, he thinks critically, reasons well and has all the instincts of a good reporter.

His grace under pressure became abundantly apparent to me during John's junior year. John hosted our weekly TV interview show, "Live on the Mall", which is fed via closed circuit across the university. As John was discussing campus politics with the president of the student government, a fire broke out in one of the dormitories. John immediately headed toward the blaze and began covering the story. Back at the video center the technician called all the local television stations, three of which wanted John's feed and went live with it for more than half an hour. The fire was quite unsettling and involved considerable damage as well as loss of life. John's calm professionalism shown through so much that his feed was also picked up briefly by two national cable news channels.

John also has a good feel for balanced and objective reporting. Case in point, while John was with us a supremacist group sprang up on campus. Although not sanctioned by the university, the group was allowed to conduct a rally. This drew protests from the vast majority of the student body. Nevertheless, John felt it important for freedom of speech to interview the group's leaders on his show.

The interview, conducted on the mall, drew a large demonstration with animosity directed not only at the group's leaders but also at John. A number of John's friends held this against him, but he unequivocally believed what he did was right. I would go so far as to say it was not only right but a reflection of mature journalistic judgment.

It was a real honor to witness John's development here at the university and it has been a joy to watch his growth since then. I cannot imagine a better recipient of this fellowship. I enthusiastically recommend him to you.

Sincerely,
Richard Samuels
Professor of Management and Communications
Syracuse University

Source: <http://www.boxfreeconcepts.com/reco/sample.html>