

Trachtenberg School
of Public Policy
& Public Administration

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

References and Recommendation Letters

Office of Career Development Services

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REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

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OVERVIEW

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/REFERENCE

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. Select someone:

- Who knows your relevant skills, abilities and experience.
- Who you have kept informed of your progress over some period of time (holiday greetings, periodic email updates/check-ins).
- Who you believe agrees with and will support your chosen course of action.

MAKING THE ASK

- Particularly for letters of recommendation, make sure they have 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.)
- Send an advance email or make a brief phone call to if they can write you a letter of recommendation or be listed as a reference. Make it comfortable for them to either say yes, no or maybe while maintaining the relationship.
 - Tell them what is involved with this specific opportunity. (i.e. listing name and contact information; talking to an employer; writing a letter of recommendation; filling out an on-line recommendation form).
 - On-line recommendation forms are the least flexible and often most time consuming.
 - Explain the expectation clearly to them such as "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."
- If needed, be open to having a further conversation with them about your qualifications and interest in this opportunity.

RECOMMENDATION LETTER PROCESS

The general rule is to **MAKE IT EASY** for the person to whom you are sending your request for a reference/recommendation. There is a good chance, especially if they are a professor, that others are also asking them for a reference.

- Once someone agrees to provide a reference or letter of recommendation for you, follow up your initial inquiry with information about the opportunity
 - For a letter of recommendation, this should be a detailed email (see next page).
 - For a reference, a conversation or an email is fine. Include information about timing, employer, position and our suitability.
- If you need multiple letters, ask your reference to tailor it for each specific place; however, remind them to make sure that the address/contact information matches the correct place.
- After the process is over, send them a thank you email/note to let them know the outcome. Not only does it show your appreciation but it also keeps them updated on your situation in case you need help in the future.

INFORMATION TO PROVIDE TO YOUR RECOMMENDER

- **Supporting Materials:** Resume and if needed, other documents (i.e. research paper, report, blog posts)
- **Process Specifics:** Deadline, relevant links, submission process
- **Explanation and Qualifications:** Why you are applying and how this supports your career/educational goals; How your background and motivations are aligned to their requirements.

DRAFTING YOUR OWN LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

It is common for referees to ask someone to draft or outline your 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 they don't leave out your important qualifications because they are 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.

- **ACCOMPLISHMENT/QUALITIES:** Make a list of key strengths and experiences you want to include along with concrete, convincing evidence. Potential areas to consider:
 - **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?
 - **Strengths/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?
 - **Personal Qualities:** Do you work well collaboratively with others? Are you creative? Adaptable to change? Are you a highly motivated self-starter?
 - **Past Accomplishments:** What are the principal two or three accomplishments you have achieved under this person's guidance?
 - **Future Potential:** What do you believe you are capable of achieving?

RECOMMENDATION LETTER OUTLINE

- **INTRODUCTION (1 paragraph)**
 - Begin 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 with specific information on why you are qualified, what you can contribute, and why your referee is providing a letter of recommendation.
- **BODY (2-3 paragraphs)**
 - State your most noteworthy qualities as it applies to this program or job position, and support that claim with a specific anecdote.
 - Include additional relevant and compelling traits and back them up by offering examples that clearly illustrate these qualities.
- **CONCLUSION (1 paragraph)**
 - 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. Include their contact information beneath your signature and name.

SAMPLE LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

Dear Selection Committee,

When I think about a student who best exemplifies leadership and a commitment to socially responsible management, First Name Last Name is at the top of the list! First name has consistently impressed me with their maturity, vision and sense of responsibility about making an impact in the world.

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

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

Based on all of this and more, I highly recommend First Name Last Name for this opportunity and truly look forward to seeing what impact they continues to have in this world!

Best regards,

First Name Last Name

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