

Letters of Recommendation and Character References

Writing a Letter of Recommendation

First Paragraph -- Start out by specifying in what capacity and for how long you have known the person whom you are recommending. If the person is an employee or coworker, indicate the term of employment, the responsibilities of the position, and any significant projects undertaken by the individual. You may wish to include a sentence about the nature of the business or the activities you were involved in. Here, you can also give a one-sentence summary or overview of your opinion of the recommended individual.

Second Paragraph -- In the next paragraph provide a more detailed evaluation of the person as an employee. Describe his or her performance on specific assignments and list any important accomplishments. What are the individual's strengths or shortcomings in the workplace? What was it like to interact with him or her? Tell a brief anecdote that encapsulates the person's qualities and character.

Third Paragraph -- To sum things up you can make a more broad characterization of the individual and his or her demeanor. Overall, was the person responsible, polite, warm, disagreeable, lazy, spiteful? Finally, indicate the degree to which you recommend the individual for the position she or he is seeking: without reservation, strongly, with some reservation, or not at all.

Character Reference Letter Overview

A character reference letter is usually written for you by someone you know outside of work. This can be a friend, neighbor or relative. It can also be a person with whom you have shared an experience, such as a teammate or fellow volunteer.

Also known as a personal reference or personal recommendation, a character reference documents your positive personal attributes. Character reference letters can also prove useful in landing jobs.

Character References for Obtaining Employment

A good character reference letter from someone you know can be helpful for job seeking when you

- Lack favorable references from current or former employers
- Are starting out and have no work history or have been out of the job market for a long time
- Have not attended college and cannot benefit from professor recommendations
- Have a potential employer who wants to better understand your background or better understand what you're really like
- Are seeking a position where particular personal characteristics are important

With the advent of personal computers and printers and the widespread practice of networking, character references are more common than in the past. Nevertheless, they are more important than ever.

Character references vs. employment references

There are five distinctions between an employment reference letter (from your boss) and a character reference letter (from your friend). Character reference letters are typically

- Less formal
- More personalized
- Not focused on an economic relationship
- Subjective in what they cover
- More straightforward

An employment reference is usually an official document on company letterhead. It is written in a formal tone and frequently follows a standard, rather impersonal format.

Employment references are courtesies extended in the business community. They are "report cards" written from employers past to employers future. To have any use, they must objectively appraise your job performance. This means they must cover all relevant aspects of your work and address both your strengths and weaknesses.

Character references usually describe your positive personal attributes. They are written by people who are loyal to you-- friends, neighbors, school or church associates. The character traits discussed in these letters are objectively stated, but are subjectively chosen for inclusion. In other words, the good things go in and the bad things stay out.

For the most part character reference letters do not pertain to an economic relationship. They are written less formally and are by their nature highly personalized. At their best, they are also quite straightforward.

General Information about Letters of Recommendation/Character References

Before asking someone to write the letter, you might want to give him/her your resume, since the writer probably will not be aware of all the work you've done. If you're not sure if the person will give you a good recommendation or not, you should ask the writer if he feels comfortable giving you a glowing recommendation. It's important to include specific information rather than putting together something vague and dispassionate.

Here are a few of your qualities that the letter writer might want to comment on:

Work habits	Ability to work with others
Punctuality	Grades in school
Appearance	Maturity level
Intelligence	Personality/friendliness
Motivation	Reliability
Work completion	Honesty

Writing the letter:

- Find someone who can portray you truthfully but positively. A recommendation or reference that paints an unrealistic picture of a candidate may be discounted. A recommendation that focuses on negative qualities may do more harm than intended.
- Although the letter in your portfolio is designed to be general in nature, you should normally tailor the recommendation to the position. A letter recommending an individual for a job as a camp counselor should contain different information from that in a letter recommending the same individual for a job as a computer programmer.
- Present the individual's general qualities relevant to the position along with one or two detailed examples. Including vivid detail will make the recommendation much more effective.
- In most cases, a letter of recommendation should consist of three or four paragraphs and not be over one page in length.