

# Guidelines for Reference Letters

I am happy to write reference letters for students; while most students ask for reference letters as though it is a personal favour, it is a part of my job, so don't sweat it! ☺ After several years of writing reference letters for students, I created this document. I hope it will help you decide whether or not to ask me to write for you, and give you further information about requesting a reference from me.

## General information

You need to ask me to write you a reference letter no later than one month before it is due.

An average reference letter takes me approximately 1-2 hours to prepare, depending on what is required and what you are applying for, in addition to any time we spend corresponding on email or meeting. This means that I require as much advance notice as possible, so that I can put your reference letter into my schedule. A reference that requires a letter and a form often takes more time, and I spend more time writing references for post-graduate applications (e.g. M.A., B.Ed., B.S.W., etc.) and large awards (e.g. SSHRC) than I do for summer jobs and smaller bursaries. This is not only because of the often greater consequences of applications and large awards, but because those references require more reading and preparation on my part.

When I was a student, I had no idea what I needed to do in order to obtain a good reference – some of this was inexperience, but a lot of it was the fact that no one in my immediate family and friend circles were familiar with academia. Before you ask a person to be a reference, think about the following:

- Feedback that you received from the person you are asking. This includes, but is not limited to, written feedback on assignments and grades, as well as verbal feedback. If you have received lukewarm feedback, or feedback that highlights the same problem over and over and that you have not addressed, or you have received average grades, this might not be the best reference.
- How did I perform in this person's class or under this person's supervision? If you can honestly answer that you did your best most of the time, this is a person who can write about you at your best – exactly what you want for a reference letter!
- Does this person know me well? Do they have a sense of who I am as a person (goals, dreams, hobbies, extra-curricular activities)? Does this person know me well enough to explain to a selection committee why they should pick me? A good reference is someone who knows you as a whole person, rather than just one facet of your life – and a side benefit is that such a person will be very motivated to help you succeed!

If the person you are considering has given you positive feedback, has seen you at your best, and knows you well, it is probably a good idea to ask them to write you a reference. However, the most important thing that students should ask a potential reference is: Can you write me a good reference? You probably have a good sense of this, but remember that just because a prof is approachable does not mean they are the best reference.

## Asking for a reference

If you and I decide that I would be a good reference for you, I will ask you for a number of things that will help me prepare for, and write your reference letter. Here is a checklist:

- ASK ME AT LEAST ONE MONTH BEFORE YOUR REFERENCE LETTER IS DUE!! I can't stress this enough – I cannot guarantee that I will write you a reference letter if you do not give me one month's notice, because I need to schedule time to do this work properly.
- Please provide me with information that will help me write your reference letter. This includes information on the program/award/job for which you are applying, an unofficial transcript, your resume/CV, assignments that I have graded (with comments), and any materials that you are submitting with your application (statement of interest, personal essay, thesis proposal, etc.). You may also consider writing a short list of qualities and accomplishments that you feel best highlight the strengths and skills that you want featured prominently in your application overall. I would like hard copies of these materials – please do not email them to me without my permission.
- Please give me any forms that need to be submitted with your reference, as well as instructions for these forms if they are not with the forms themselves. If it is an online application, please send me the links in an email titled "YOURLASTNAME ONLINE REFERENCE" if the application does not send them to me automatically. If it is not an online application, please print out the forms and instructions and give them to me.
- It is not necessary to provide envelopes or postage for your application.

If you would like, we can meet to talk about the items in this checklist – in fact, most of the time I think it is best if we have an opportunity to talk before I write your reference letter.

### **Confirming your reference**

One week before the application is due, please send me a reminder email. I put your reference in my calendar immediately, but if there are two of us keeping track of the reference, we know it will definitely get in on time! I will send you an email to confirm that your reference has been sent according to the instructions (by email or by post).

**GOOD LUCK!!**

*Rachel*