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What is a Reference?

During the job search, you may be asked to provide a list of references. A professional reference is a person who knows you well and can speak to your strengths and past performance. The reference may be contacted by your prospective employers by phone. Note that a reference is not the same as a recommendation letter: a reference will provide information over the phone when contacted by a prospective employer.

Step 1: Brainstorm Potential References

You should start to brainstorm potential references even before you begin your job search. Like a resume, a strong list of references is a document that you should have in your portfolio.

As a college student, you may not have much experience working in a professional capacity, and you may not have a direct supervisor who can speak to your past performance. That's OK! Co-workers, professors, deans, coaches, club presidents, and volunteer coordinators can all be great references when you're first starting out.

Once you have a list of people, you'll need to narrow down your list to three or four. In order to figure out which people will be your best references, ask yourself the following questions:

- *What is your relationship with this person?* – You should choose people who know you well, regardless of their title. Do not ask high-level supervisors to serve as your references if you have never worked closely with them.
- *What will the person say about your background and performance?* – Ideally, references will talk positively about your past performance and increase your chances of getting the job. You should choose people who have given you positive feedback and were impressed by your work in the past.
- *How strong are this person's communication skills?* – A reference check will typically be conducted over the phone, so you should choose people who are strong oral communicators.

Step 2: Ask for References

It is essential that you ask each person for permission before putting his/her name down as a reference. The last thing you'll want is a prospective employer surprising your reference with a phone call, causing the reference to stumble and not know what to say! Asking ahead is polite and gives your reference time to prepare.

Try to meet with each person to ask if he/she is willing to serve as a reference. Take this as an opportunity to catch up, recall your work together, and talk about your career goals. If you and your references are not in the same city, then you can call them on the phone. Email can also be appropriate if your references are very busy or hard to reach.

You might feel awkward bringing up the subject of references. To soften the question, ask in a way that allows your reference to politely decline. For example, you might say, “Would you be comfortable serving as a reference in my upcoming job hunt?” or “Do you feel you could give me a good reference?” This way, if the person feels as if he/she doesn’t know you well enough to serve as a reference, you’ll know right away.

What should you do if the person says no? In that case, thank the person and move on to the next person on your list. Do not pressure anybody into serving as your reference – it will not help you in your job search in any way. Remember, you want to find somebody who is eager to speak about your strengths and provide you with a glowing reference.

If the person says yes, be sure to thank him/her and get the appropriate contact information and current job title. Ask how he/she would prefer to be contacted, and finish by saying that you will be in touch with more information shortly. If you no longer work with this person, it’s a nice gesture to send a handwritten thank you note.

Step 3: Prepare a Reference List

Your reference list should be a separate document that matches the font and style of your resume and cover letter. You should not mention references on your resume.

For each reference, include the name, title, work address, phone number, and email address. If applicable, you may also write a brief sentence explaining your relationship. Be consistent in the format for each reference listed.

Example: Dr. Jack Hoya
Associate Professor
Department of Government
Intercultural Center (ICC) 681
3700 O Street, N.W., Washington D.C. 20057
Phone: (202) 687.6130
Email: Jack.Hoya@georgetown.edu

Print a few copies of your reference list and keep them in a portfolio that you will bring to interviews. Only provide the reference list if it is requested.

Step 4: Help your References

Now that you’re ready to apply for jobs, send your references a quick update about the kinds of jobs that you’re looking into. You don’t need to provide job descriptions at this stage – as a college student, you may be applying to a multitude of jobs, and you don’t want to overwhelm your references with information. Just give a brief paragraph about your desired industry and job type, and outline the skills and abilities you’d like to highlight.

Example: I’m looking to pursue a career in management consulting for the public sector. To show that I am qualified for this job, I would like to highlight my experience with policy research, operations, data analytics, presentations, and reports. Other important skills that I hope to emphasize are critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving. The term paper that I completed about Medicaid, which you encouraged me to submit to the Georgetown Undergraduate Law Review, is a good example of my past work that demonstrates these skills.

This information can be transmitted via email. In fact, it's a good idea to attach to this email some of your supporting documents, including your resume, unofficial transcript, and past projects you've completed for this person, including their comments and your grade (if applicable). Attach any materials that stand out in your mind – with this reminder, they will stand out in your reference's mind as well.

Be careful! You'll want to keep this information brief, for two reasons. First, your references are busy, and they probably do not have time to sift through a whole packet of materials. Second, your references need to speak for themselves: they shouldn't be recounting facts in a way that sounds like they're reading off of your cover letter.

Once you start interviewing, you should continue to update your references. Many companies conduct reference checks after the first interview; so, after you have had a successful interview, you should notify your references and forward to them a copy of the job description. If you are particularly interested in a certain job, be sure to let your references know.

Step 5: Thank your References

As always, you should thank your references – whether or not you were offered the job. Following up with a thank you note is a great way to maintain your relationships and let your references know how much you appreciate their help. You should always be polite: remember, you may need their help in the future! A handwritten note is always a nice gesture.

Other great ways to stay in touch with your references include email, LinkedIn, and Facebook. However, think before you post information on social media, both about yourself and about your reference. Including your reference's contact information on your LinkedIn profile or Facebook page may induce spam phone calls and emails. Remember that your references are important assets: don't overwhelm them!