

Reference Letters and Reference Lists

Letters of Recommendation

If you are contemplating employment or graduate or professional school, now is the time to begin soliciting letters of recommendation from professors, advisors, and former employers (if you haven't already). This may appear to be a daunting task, but if you keep the following things in mind, you are sure to make the task as painless as possible.

Before you begin asking for recommendations, you should determine the purpose of the recommendation. A recommendation for employment may be quite different from one required for graduate study.

As you determine the purpose(s) of your recommendations, you can develop a list of those people who can best speak to the skills relative to the purpose. For instance, your work supervisor may write the best recommendation for employment and your academic advisor may write the best one for graduate study. You should also keep in mind what type of person the recipient of the letter would like to hear from. For example, academic institutions looking for a scholar would like to hear from a thesis or dissertation advisor.

Be sure to ask people whom you feel will give supportive references. If you are unsure, don't be afraid to discuss this with potential references. Ask them if they feel they can give you a positive recommendation. If they can't, it is better to find this out in the privacy of someone's office before the letter is written and sent.

Since faculty and administrative personnel work with hundreds of students every semester, be sure to update your writers on your skills and accomplishments. This may mean preparing a resume for your writers as well as listing courses you took with them, grades earned, and papers written. Whatever it takes, make sure that you give them a good all around picture of yourself.

Additionally, you will want to attach a note to inform your writers of the specific purposes of the recommendation letter and the types of skills and qualities you want emphasized. This is something you might even want to talk about with your references.

Finally, be sure to inform them of all appropriate deadlines. If you have established a credential file with the Career and Professional Development Center, we encourage you to have your letters arrive at the Career and Professional Development Center at least ten (10) working days before you want the letters sent out. If your writers will be sending letters directly to recipients, provide them with an envelope and correct postage.

Don't wait until the last minute to solicit letters of recommendation. It is better to give plenty of advance notice to your writers. Sufficient advance notice will also allow you to make the best choices when it comes to deciding what letters will be written by whom.

Undergraduates should consider asking for references as early as junior year. It is best to get a faculty recommendation as soon after as possible. For graduate students, September and October of your final year are the most appropriate times, as well as two months before a scholarship or

conference deadline. Both undergraduates and graduates should remember that faculty sometimes go on leave for six months or a year and may be unavailable to write letters for you, so plan ahead.

In some instances, writers will not respond within a reasonable length of time. If this should happen to you, consider dropping a note in their mailbox. This note should gently remind references of the deadline date. If this does not work, you may want to call or drop by their offices. As a last resort, you might ask departmental administrative assistants what might be the best approach to a faculty member.

Adapted from: Career News, October 1991, Washington University.

Reference Lists

When applying for internships and jobs, you may be asked to supply a list of references. There are two types of references: personal and professional. You should have at least three personal and three professional references available. Professional references are those people who can address your abilities in your chosen career field and your overall work ethic. Professional references, may include the following:

- current or past supervisors
- faculty members
- academic advisors
- internship supervisors
- coaches

Personal references are able to discuss your personal traits. Be careful not to include family members. While these people may give you great recommendations, they are irrelevant. Personal references can include:

- sports teammates
- fellow organization members (i.e. fraternities, sororities, clubs, etc...)
- fellow volunteers
- fellow co-workers
- mentors

Whether personal or professional, you should always ask the reference if he/she is comfortable providing a recommendation for you. This also allows your reference to decide what information will be provided on your behalf so that he/she will not be taken off-guard. It is also important to provide your references with a copy of your resume so that they are updated on your goals and accomplishments.

Supplying your reference list to potential employers should always be done separate from your resume and not as part of the document. The reference list should be on a separate sheet of paper and supplied to the potential employer only upon request. Please review the following two variations of reference lists and contact your Career Consultant if you have further questions.

REFERENCES FOR CHLOE CHEMISTRY

Dr. Lawrence Laboratory
Professor of Chemistry
Carnegie Mellon University
5000 Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 555-5555
llaboratory@andrew.cmu.edu

Dr. Bunsen Burner
Director of Research
Big Research Institute
123 Experimental Street
New York, NY 65432
bburner@bri.org

Ms. Connie Sultant
Career Consultant
Carnegie Mellon University
5000 Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 123-4567
csultant@andrew.cmu.edu

REFERENCES FOR CHLOE CHEMISTRY

**Dr. Lawrence Laboratory
Professor of Chemistry
Carnegie Mellon University
5000 Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 555-5555
llaboratory@andrew.cmu.edu**

Dr. Laboratory has served as my academic advisor for the past three years. He is able to address my academic achievements and problem-solving abilities.

**Dr. Bunsen Burner
Director of Research
Big Research Institute
123 Experimental Street
New York, NY 65432
bburner@bri.org**

Dr. Burner served as my internship supervisor for the past two summers. He is able to address my analytical, and technical skills in a laboratory setting.

**Ms. Connie Sultant
Career Consultant
Carnegie Mellon University
5000 Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 123-4567
csultant@andrew.cmu.edu**

Ms. Sultant has been my supervisor for the past three years in the Carnegie Mellon Career and Professional Development Center.

She can address my work ethic, dedication, teamwork, and organizational skills.