

PROFESSIONAL REFERENCES

Definition and Purpose

A reference is a person with whom you have a personal relationship who has, upon your previous request, agreed to talk to employers to understand your potential as a future employee during the job application process.

The purpose of references is for potential employers to verify that the information you provided in your application materials is true. References also add a different perspective about who you are as an individual and potential as an employee in terms of traits such as your work ethic and your habits.

The Basics

- References will likely be asked by employers to answer two types of questions:
 1. Personal questions regarding what they think of you and your potential to be a good fit for the organization to which you are applying to work.
 2. Fact-based questions regarding their relationship with you, such as how long you worked for them and what sorts of things you did.
 - The strength of references often assists employers with making tough decisions when deciding among qualified top candidates.
 - Employers will not contact references before interviewing you—it is a lot of work on their part and they try to identify potential final candidates first.
 - References are not listed on your résumé. There are two methods of providing references upon a request. The first is to enter the contact information for your references into an online or paper application. The other is to create a list on a separate document called a reference sheet, which is simply a compilation of your references' contact information that you would submit upon request to the organization to which you are applying.
 - Employers typically request that you provide the contact information for 3-5 professional references. Provide only the number requested (no more, no less), and provide your references only if asked.
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The Process

1. **Identify** a variety of individuals you would like to ask to serve as a professional reference for your internship/job candidacy. Consider individuals:
 - With whom you have a personal, yet professional, connection (not people who know you only socially or familiarly, such as friends or family).
 - From your recent past and present, including professors, volunteer supervisors, employers, work supervisors, coaches, and mentors.
 - Who can attest to your skills and experiences in a work context that relate to the types of jobs/internships you are applying—think about the types of things you want them to say about you. Some areas include: reliability, ability to learn quickly, teamwork, follow-through, honesty, leadership skills, ability to take initiative, productivity, time management, etc.
 - Who will speak positively of your skills and your potential—not negatively or neutrally.

2. **Ask** the individuals to serve as your professional reference.
 - Ideally, this conversation would happen in person, but if that's not possible, then over the phone or email would work.
 - Tell them about your professional (and personal, if related to your application) goals.
 - Tell them why you think that the relationship between the two of you is strong enough, or share something that you have done with them to make them understand the skills that you want them to highlight about you.
 - Explain to them that a reference letter is not required, only their contact information.
 - Ask your potential references if they will have the availability to serve as your reference (e.g., not on sabbatical or out of the country during your selection process) and would be willing to serve as a strong reference.
 - If the individuals agree, thank them and then ask if they would like any additional materials or direction with which skills and/or experiences to address during a reference call that would assist in their ability to serve as a strong reference for you.
 - Confirm their contact information, including name spelling, titles, addresses, phone number and email.
 - If the individuals decline for any reason (e.g., not available in the time frame needed, don't feel that they know you well enough to provide a strong reference), thank them for their time. Do not try to convince a potential reference into saying yes, because you only want references who will be a strong advocate on your behalf.

3. **Create** a reference sheet to submit to the employer requesting your references.
 - Insert your contact information at the top of a blank page formatted identically to your résumé and cover letter to create consistency among all of your application documents.
 - Create a complete entry for each reference that includes their full name, title, organization, complete mailing address, phone number, and email address.
 - Remember to use the salutations of Dr., Mr., Mx or Ms. (not Miss or Mrs.)
 - Be intentional about the order in which you list your references. Employers typically call them in the order you provide.

4. **Provide** your references with supporting materials and additional information to assist them in serving as your reference. Some recommendations include:
 - The position description for which you have submitted or will submit your application materials.
 - The résumé for the position you have submitted or will submit for your application.
 - The cover letter for the position you have submitted or will submit for your application.

5. **Follow up** with each of your references.
 - Initially thank each of your references for agreeing to help you.
 - Keep them updated on where you are submitting their names, what jobs, and perhaps even a job description for each. Regular contact is not seen as annoying but, instead, as a useful way in which to help them help you. Contact your references to prepare them once an employer tells you they are checking your references.
 - Thank them after each reference inquiry for which they served as your reference through handwritten or emailed thank-you notes.
 - Notify them when you have secured a position for which they served as your reference.

Professional Reference Tips

- NEVER assume that someone will serve as your reference; ALWAYS ask.
 - The sooner you ask, the better. It is best to ask when your relationship is fresh and they feel more strongly connected to you.
 - Only give out your references to potential employers when you are asked.
 - Provide only the number of references requested by the employer, no more or less.
 - Contact a CLS adviser if you have a question about how to handle your references with an application.
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Sample Email Request

Dear Professor Worthington,

Would you be willing to serve as a strong reference for me?

I am in the process of applying for jobs and am beginning to build a reference page for myself. My goals include getting a full-time job following graduation that will help me gain further experience in nonprofit management and food justice issues.

Over the past three years through my coursework and our MAP last summer, I believe you have gotten to know my strengths and can speak to my academic abilities, work ethic, potential, and trustworthiness. I have attached my résumé for your reference.

If you are willing to be a professional reference for me, I will inform you each time I submit your name as a reference and include a description of the job I am applying for.

Thank you so much for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,
Ben Cheng

Sample Reminder Note

Dear Professor Worthington,

After two successful interview rounds, the human resources manager, Sami Ryan, at the Women in Sustainable Agriculture Network (WSAN) requested my list of references. Thank you for agreeing to be on my list! I've included the job description and very much appreciate your time. I'm very excited about this position.

Yours sincerely,
Ben Cheng

Sample Thank-You Note

Dear Professor Worthington,

Thank you for taking the time to serve as my reference for my Women in Sustainable Agriculture Network (WSAN) job application. I know you have a full schedule right now, considering the busy nature of this time of the semester, and I really appreciate your time and efforts to help me. I will let you know as soon as I find out whether or not I've received a job offer from WSAN.

Very truly yours,
Ben Cheng

Sample Reference Sheet

(match your resume in font and layout)

Mengyu (Ben) Cheng

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References

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