

Letters of Recommendation and References



Letters of Recommendation vs. Reference List

Although people often use the terms recommendation letter and reference interchangeably, these items do differ in purpose. A letter of recommendation is a formal letter that is written on an individual's behalf for a professional opportunity, scholarship, fellowship, or graduate school program. A reference list is a listing of individuals that have agreed to provide an endorsement of your character, knowledge and skills. An employer may call those listed on your reference list. **See a Sample Reference List at the end of this guide.**

Choosing a Recommender or Reference

- Ask someone that knows you well and that can speak to your strengths, experience and accomplishments related to the position or graduate program to which you are applying. Professors, advisors, work/internship supervisors, and university administrators with whom you have developed positive relationships are all potential recommenders.
- Letters of Recommendation do not always have to be from a supervisor; you want to choose someone that can evaluate your work rather than just have a higher title than you have.
- Do not choose a reference just because you think they have an impressive title; these are usually less impressive than getting a letter from someone that knows you well and the work you do on a daily basis.
- If you are applying to graduate school, be sure to look at the letters of recommendation requirements to ensure you are fulfilling the requirement. Most graduate school programs will want at least one letter from a faculty member or advisor in your discipline.
- When choosing a faculty recommender, be sure to select a professor from a class in which you actively engaged performed well. Additionally, if you have a professor who supervised your research they may an ideal reference.

Ensuring Strong Letters of Recommendation

- If you are choosing a recommender from a class you took early in your studies at Arcadia, it is important to maintain a strong rapport with that recommender over the course of your time at AU. Make sure they are updated about your accomplishments and can speak about you from a current and relevant standpoint.
- You can build strong relationships with faculty and advisors by talking to them about your career goals and interests during their office hours and asking them for advice.
- If you are applying to graduate school, most of your references will most likely come from the department that correlates with your major. Be sure to develop close relationships with faculty within your major.
- Once you have developed a good rapport with a faculty member or advisor, schedule an appointment with them to discuss your future plans and career goals. Ask if they can connect you with any alumni that work in a related field.
- If you work on campus, off campus, or at an internship, be sure to work hard and take initiative. Supervisors can often provide strong letters of recommendation as they can help a future employer understand your work performance, potential and character.

Asking for a Letter of Recommendation or Reference

- When you approach a reference about writing your letter, be sure to ask them if they can provide a strong and positive letter of recommendation on your behalf. This may seem awkward but it is better to ensure that the letter will be glowing rather than have a negative letter, just because the recommender did not want to say *no* to you.
- Ask the recommender if they feel comfortable writing a letter on your behalf by asking if they know you and your work well enough to provide a thoughtful and genuine reference. This gives the recommender an opportunity to say *no* if they honestly do not feel comfortable.
- Many positions will ask for a list of your references during the application period. This is not a letter of recommendation request. Instead, you will provide a list that includes contact information of supervisors, faculty, advisors etc. whom the company can call to discuss your candidacy. (See more details below in the "Creating a Reference List" section.)

- Important! Always ask for a recommendations at least 3 to 4 weeks prior to providing an employer or graduate program with the recommender’s contact information. Be very clear with recommenders regarding your timeline and submission deadlines. Asking a recommender to write a letter last minute is typically frowned upon as this also reflects poorly on your time management skills.
- Notify your recommender each time you list them on your graduate/professional school or internship/employment applications.
- If the recommender agrees to write a letter on your behalf, ask them if they need you to provide them with any materials or information about the position or graduate school to which you are applying. For example, you will want to provide your recommender with the following information:
 - Your résumé, your personal statement (for graduate school) or cover letter (for a job).
 - The name of the graduate program(s), due date and guidelines for submission.
 - A job description of the position (for a job).
 - Any other information that may assist the recommender with writing a positive letter.
- Schedule an appointment to meet with your recommender to discuss the program or opportunity in person. This will help them connect your performance with the opportunity to which you are applying.
- Identify a list of at least six references that you can alternate among, so you do not over burden your recommenders.
- Remember that it can take a long time for references to write thoughtful and detailed letters. However, it is fine to check in with your reference one week before the deadline if you have not been notified that the letter or reference was received (when applying to graduate school you can typically see which letters are received by a university in their online admissions portal).
- Be thoughtful of how many letters you are asking an individual to write. Make sure there is sufficient time when asking for a follow-up letter for a different opportunity.

Creating a Reference List

- Provide a list of recommenders’ contact information upon the request of your interviewer.
- Sometimes a position will require applicants to upload a reference list as part of the application.
- Graduate programs and employers do not value personal references, such as those from family and friends.
- List names and contact information for 3 to 4 individuals or however many are requested.
- Reference providers should be able to answer:
 - How long they have known you
 - Their professional relationship with you
 - Description of your duties
 - Quality of your work
 - Communication skills
 - Decision-making ability
 - Strengths and weaknesses
 - Attendance (if professor or former supervisor)
- Use a spreadsheet to monitor references. Update the addresses, phone numbers, email addresses annually.
- The reference page should replicate the top of your résumé in appearance (see sample to the right).
- Include each reference’s name, professional title, organization, address, phone number and e-mail.
- Do not write “References available upon request” on your résumé.

SAMPLE REFERENCE LIST

Morgan A. Brunelli
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brunellima@aol.com, (215) 555-0000

References

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