

Reference Letters



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What is a reference letter?

A reference letter is a letter of recommendation from a previous or current supervisor, professor, co-worker, peer or personal contact who can describe the knowledge, skills or aptitudes that you possess.

Uses for reference letters

Reference letters can be used when looking for work or applying to graduate school. Reference letters may be required when applying for monetary awards, such as a fellowship or grant. When presented selectively in a portfolio, reference letters provide compelling evidence to an employer or committee about your abilities.

While your referees can provide a verbal reference, letters can be used if your reference has moved away, is no longer with the organization, or is out of reach for some reason, such as on holiday, when you need to supply your references.

Who makes a good reference?

When looking for employment, a current or previous employer or direct supervisor is the best reference. It is also acceptable to include a direct supervisor from unpaid employment, such as a practicum or a volunteer position. When applying for graduate or professional school, persons who can comment on your academic achievements, such as a professor, or a professional who is active in the field you wish to enter, are excellent choices. Personal and/or professional acquaintances—for example, a high-ranking community member or professional in good standing whom you know personally—are also acceptable.

What makes a good reference letter?

- Use of action verbs to describe your accomplishments, skills and strengths.
- Use of the active voice which indicates that you completed tasks and demonstrated desirable behaviours. The passive voice can indicate that events happened to you and tasks would have been completed whether you were there or not.
- How you performed the responsibilities required for the position or role. A glowing reference letter will include how you exceeded expectations in your position/role, even if it is only in one area.
- Descriptions of your contributions to the work/academic environment, whether in regards to your work habits, such as completed tasks on time, or your personal strengths, for example you are collegial and supportive.
- If possible, a statement indicating that the referee would re-hire you or collaborate with you on another project. People may also work several times for the same organization and it is beneficial for you if the letter indicates that you worked for or with the referee several times or that they expect to work with you in the future.
- The referee's contact information including his or her full name, appropriate title, address, phone number and/or e-mail address.

How do you obtain a reference letter?

First, do a good job. No one owes you a reference letter and your supervisor may turn you down if they feel your work has been less than satisfactory. Avoid asking for a reference letter during a peak period, such as in the middle of marking mid-terms or preparing payroll, since a letter written on the fly may be inadequate. Appreciate their honesty if your supervisor or professor declines your request since a mediocre or poor reference letter may be harmful to your candidacy.

Indicate what you are using the letter for and who you are giving the letter to because this improves the focus of the letter. Offer your referees a copy of your up-to-date resume/c.v. and a brief description of the position or types of positions that you are applying for. Your referees can write specifically about your skills in relation to the position(s). Your referees will also need time to write a good letter, so give them at least two to three weeks to prepare the letter.

Your referees also need to know:

- The name of the person they are addressing the letter to. If you are using the letter for your portfolio, it is acceptable to address the letter “Dear Sir or Madam”.
- The date the letter is needed and whether you will pick the letter up or the address to which the letter should be sent.
- How to contact you if they have questions or to tell you that the letter is ready for pick-up, or if the letter has been sent.
- Number of copies you require. If you get a great letter for one application, why not ask if you can get additional copies for future use?

Additional considerations

- Detailed, targeted reference letters are much more effective than general reference letters.
- When you ask someone for a written reference, ask for permission to use them as a verbal reference as well. Each time you supply their name as a reference, you should, as a courtesy, contact them to tell them that someone may be in touch with them. It is not very helpful to your application if your referee responds with “Who are you talking about?” when called for a reference.
- Three references for each application are usually sufficient unless you are asked to supply more. If asked to supply a reference letter when applying, it is acceptable to submit a photocopy. Bring the originals to the interview but always keep them in your possession. It is hard to replace good reference letters, especially if you are no longer in personal contact with the referee.
- Thank everyone who provides you with a reference letter. A good letter will have taken several hours to complete so they deserve your appreciation and/or an update on the results of the competition.
- Reference letters get old. As you progress in your career, you should continue to acquire references who can talk about your work, personal traits and skills. You should also maintain your contacts so you can ask them for updated material if necessary.

This booklet includes several different samples of reference letters for different situations. These letters are meant only as suggestions. **Do not copy any of the letters and provide them as a reference letter for a referee to sign.** Some applicants have copied templates, sometimes word for word, merely changing the name and position of the person on the template to suit the person who offered to write a reference. *With the name changed to suit referees, different applicants have supplied the same letter, to the same competition.* Sounds like an urban legend? No, human resource professionals have told CaPS that this has happened in the past. It is especially tragic when the applicant has cited his/her “originality”, “creativity” and “integrity” on the resume. Get letters based on your own experience.

Advice to potential referees

A student, employee or colleague has asked you to write a reference letter but you have never written one before or you are not sure what the appropriate content is for a reference letter. What should you write for that person?

First, you should feel free to decline the request if you do not know the person well, have little positive to say or simply do not have the time to write an effective letter. A poorly written letter is as troubling as a letter describing mediocre performance.

If you decide to accept the request, you should take the time to read through the requirements of the position, program or award the person is applying for. Next you should consider how the person's previous behaviour and actions relate to the position, program or award and how his or her work will benefit the organization that he or she is applying to.

In general the reference should:

- Include dates to indicate how long you have known the person or when worked with or supervised the person. If you have worked with this person repeatedly indicate this in letter since working more than once with a person answers the all-important question "Would you hire/collaborate with this person again?" In the case of a student, if she or he took several classes with you, indicate how he or she developed as a student or professional in your field.
- Summarize the work that the person provided for you. You can indicate the title of the work or project, the results and if the results the person produced were new or outstanding in any way. You may also comment on any software or research techniques the person used to attain these results.
- Explain clearly what tasks the person performed and use plain English to describe the student's performance.

If you are asked to write a reference letter for a person who is applying for work outside of academia, or a field that you are unfamiliar with, what should you write? Ask to see the criteria that the person must meet so you can write a targeted letter that uses some of the language, terms and skills from the criteria. You can also ask to see the person's c.v. or resume so you can comment on his or her experience in relation to the criteria.

Some professors decline to write a reference letter for a student who would like to use the letter to find employment because they are not sure how to convey what the student did in class in relation to the position. Focus on relevant transferable skills that the position requires. Transferable skills are abilities that are usable in different areas. Examples include:

- A student who delivers assignments on time and according to the criteria will also be asked to hand in work materials on a deadline and meeting the standards of the workplace.
- Using research techniques and software programs, as well as demonstrating analytical, numeracy and communication skills are valued not only in university but also in the workplace.
- If you are a language professor, you can comment on the student's linguistic ability, oral fluency and confidence communicating in the language, since the student should be able to apply the language in classroom as well as in the workplace.

The request may become more complicated when the person would like to have a general reference letter for several competitions or as part of a work search portfolio. If you are not sure what to comment on, not an uncommon problem for a person writing a general letter, here are some skills and qualities that most organizations look for in potential employees:

- Communication skills, such as persuasive writing or delivering presentations.
- Teamwork skills, including how much work the student performed when collaborating on a group or research project with you. You may also comment on the student's conflict resolution skills and ability to compromise or take direction within the pair or group.
- Organizational skills, such as consulting with you during the course of a project, delivering a rough draft when asked and supplying the final material at deadline.
- Personal attributes such as collegial, friendly and hard-working.
- Enthusiasm for the profession and motivation to learn.

This list is from the *CaPS Employer Survey 2006* and are the non-job related skills most sought after by employers. Additional desired skills identified by the survey included willingness to learn, interpersonal skills, attention to detail, stress management and work ethic or reliability. When developed and demonstrated, these skills will help the student either in the workplace or in continued academic studies.

You can volunteer to write a reference letter for a person who has not asked for one. A student will always need reference letters for a variety of purposes.

You can reward a student who had great attendance, provided an outstanding presentation or paper, showed up for study sessions and/or was a pleasure to teach. A student who did poorly in the class but tried hard may be too shy to ask for a reference letter but if you want to commend diligence, your letter is generous encouragement.

Permission and Privacy

Permission, privacy and information, especially in respect to employment, is an area undergoing constant evolution. Though there are similarities, the application of privacy legislation and access to information is not uniform between geographic regions, or between organizations with varying business models or legislative roles. Therefore, prior to asking for or providing a reference, we strongly suggest that you consult with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIPP) at the University of Alberta. To provide you with information they will ask you the following questions:

- 1) Who is the letter for?
- 2) Who will receive the letter?
- 3) What is the purpose for the letter?
- 4) Where will the letter be stored and will copies be made?

There are also a series of forms that are available on the website of the University of Alberta FOIPP office, <http://www.ipu.ualberta.ca/>, such as a Student Reference Disclosure Authorization form. Prior to asking for or writing a letter of reference, we suggest you check the U of A FOIPP office website, or call their offices, (780) 492-9419 for assistance, to make sure that you have the most up to date information in regards to the request.

Sample Reference Letter:
Tepid Reference

December 11, 20XX

Mary Mediocre
Suite 100, Typical Office
12345 Downtown Street
Edmonton, AB T6K 8N1

This is a mediocre letter since it says, *Tom showed up and his team did an average job. He can keep a seat warm.* Tom is a "tepid" not stellar employee.

To whom it may concern,

I confirm that Tom Terrific was employed as an Inside Sales Rep with Typical Office from September 8, 20XX to January 19, 20XX.

Tom readily fulfilled his responsibilities of making sales calls, following up on orders and participating in sales meetings. He learned about new products quickly. Tom's sales team has met their sales quotas for the past two years.

Tom was a team player and easily got along with the other people in the office. He also held an acceptable attendance record.

I would recommend Tom Terrific to whichever position he might be applying for. If you need further information you can contact me at mary.mediocre@typicaloffice.ca.

Sincerely,

Mary Mediocre

Sample Reference Letter: Former Supervisor 1

November 29, 20XX
Provincial Tourism Board
Government House
Edmonton, Alberta T5G 4G7

Dear Ms. Hiring,

I am pleased to recommend Justin Case for the position of Special Events Coordinator with the Provincial Tourism Board. I believe that Justin's experience with Tools and Stuff first as an Assistant Manager and recently as a Human Resources Recruiter will compliment the role and the many skills it requires.

Justin was hired in May 1999 as a Manager Trainee with Tools and Stuff. Justin was the youngest manager hired into this role in Canada. He progressed into the role of Assistant Manager in July 1999. Although the Assistant Manager role is junior position within the management hierarchy, Justin often managed the 10,000 ft² alone with a staff of 15-40 associates reporting directly to him. His duties included maintain sales through coaching, providing exceptional customer service, following up on customer concerns, ordering additional product, and delivering performance reviews. Not only did Justin meet these requirements of the job, he also developed an employee recognition program that highlighted individual skills of associates and created incentive programs that enabled associates to see their progress. Justin's professionalism and interpersonal skills allowed him to cultivate a strong team environment and gain the respect of his peers.

In September 2000 Justin was promoted to Human Resources Recruiter for Western Canada. In this role Justin interviewed management candidates across Canada to fill the vacancies created by twenty new store openings each year. Justin quickly adapted to the rigorous travel and tight deadlines. In addition to his demanding schedule, Justin also took over the duties of a co-worker while she went on maternity leave and single-handedly organized, executed, and followed-up on twenty University career fairs across western Canada. This requires detail oriented organizational skills, an ability to adapt to many circumstances, and strong interpersonal skills. Because of Justin's success in this role he was asked to train other recruiters on the successful strategy in order to create a strong recruitment presence across Canada. Justin is eager to succeed and finds ways to improve his workplace.

To conclude, I have been very happy with Justin Case's performance as an Assistant Manager and Recruiter for Tools and Stuff. I would not hesitate to re-hire Justin. I believe his experience in dealing with students at career fairs, his in-depth knowledge of hiring practices, and his ability to communicate effectively makes him a strong candidate for the position of Special Events Coordinator with the Provincial Tourism Board. If you have any questions or concerns regarding Justin's performance at Tools and Stuff, please contact me directly at 780-482-9000.

Sincerely,

Ref Errance
Human Resource Manager
Tools and Stuff

Sample Reference Letter: Former Supervisor 2

Adele Fraser
Student Advisor
Student Services
University of Edmonton
Edmonton, AB T6G 2J7

December 11, 20XX

Human Resources Department
Pacifica University College
1019 Oceania Avenue
Vancouver, BC V5T 1Y9

Dear Sir or Madam:

Re: Letter of Recommendation for Kathryn Heath, applicant for the position of Career Advisor, Competition No: 12.06.078

I am pleased to provide a reference for Kathryn Heath who I have known for approximately five years. Kathryn and I first met as student staff, on the Workshops and Presentations team, at Student Services at the University of Edmonton. After Kathryn moved on to work in career development with the federal government, we continued to meet, often at professional development events, to share ideas and practices to enrich our work as career practitioners. I believe Kathryn's work and education experience make her a strong candidate for the position of Career Advisor in the Bachelor of Education University Transfer Program at Pacifica University College.

Kathryn's work assignment with Student Services was multi-faceted. She worked in the Information Centre, which serves 1,500 students per week, the place of first contact for many clients. There she provided students with on the spot advising-directing them to the most appropriate resources (workshops, books, tip sheets, forums or fairs, web sites, other agencies, etc.) and answering questions. She also conducted one-on-one hour long consultations in the areas of work search and career decision-making, resume critiquing, and mock interviews. Her clients and co-workers appreciated the breadth of her knowledge, developed through continuing education, both formal and informal. In her workshops and presentations, Kathryn was enthusiastic, competent, and confident. We often co-facilitated and I could always count on her to be well prepared. I particularly appreciated her expertise when we presented to graduating students, a group known for asking probing and wide-ranging questions. Drawing on her experience as a former high school teacher, Kathryn was able to satisfy even the most challenging of our workshop participants. Student Services put Kathryn's writing skills to work as well. She revised a number of workshop facilitator's manuals, co-authored a self-employment workshop script, and developed a number of handouts.

Kathryn was frequently entrusted with challenging assignments. On one occasion, she was asked to provide a four-day career development workshop tailored to the needs of technically sophisticated post-graduate information technology students. Working with a very tight time frame, Kathryn recruited a team of facilitators, secured workshop materials more suited to her IT audience, and adapted material to include many on-line resources so the students could make use of their computers throughout the presentations. Her efforts proved successful. Student Services was invited back to offer the workshops on several subsequent occasions.

After Kathryn left the Information Centre, I was pleased to maintain our mutually sustaining professional and personal relationship. I believe she would be an asset to Pacifica University College and an outstanding resource for its students. I wish her well. Should you have any questions regarding Kathryn's qualifications, please call me at (780) 555-4587.

Sincerely,

Adele Fraser

Sample Reference Letter: Scholarship Reference

November 21, 20XX

Legacy Scholarship for Leadership Development
Leadership Foundation for Youth Initiatives
#300, 8657 – 51 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta T6E 6A8

Dear Adam Smith:

As President of the Centre for Student Leadership at the University of Alberta, I am extremely pleased to be able to recommend Miss Hana Lovage for the Legacy Scholarship in Leadership Development. I have only known Hana for about two years but have had the opportunity to see her on many occasions, performing with exceptional skill for a person of her age.

CSL is dedicated to providing leadership development initiatives to students by means of introducing them to business practices and allowing them to run their own companies for the course of the term. Hana proved herself very capable as a leader through her role as President of the "Globe Trotters" company that was twinned with a student leadership program in Newton Abbot, England. This was our first experience with a student company running an international business. She did an outstanding job communicating with her team and providing them with direction on this pilot project. At our annual awards night Hana was named sales person of the year by the Alberta Life Underwriters Association. This is based not only on her exceptional sales but also her ability to think on her feet and communicate company initiatives in a way that promote teamwork and product knowledge.

Hana was chosen out of all of our delegates to make a speech at the Media conference where our Chairman Jodi Norris announced our new initiatives for student development which will include international travel opportunities. She did an outstanding job and received many compliments on her oratorical skills. Hana was then selected to attend the Western Canadian Student Leadership Conference in Calgary, Alberta and then the Canadian National Student Leadership Conference in Hamilton, Ontario where she represented the whole western region. We were also lucky to have her as a summer student during the summer of 2000 and I was delighted with her initiative and overall work habits.

This is an outstanding young woman with exceptional leadership skills, very good interpersonal skills, and wonderful work ethic. I am sure she will benefit from your scholarship and represent your organization well through her work. Should you have any questions concerning Hana Lovage, please contact me directly at 780-555-1234.

Sincerely yours,

William Coriander
President
Centre for Student Leadership
University of Edmonton

**Sample Reference Letter:
School Reference (French)**

Le 25 novembre 2006

Faculté St. Jean
Programme Bilingue, Administration des Affaires
8406 - 91 rue, Marie-Anne-Gaboury
Edmonton, Alberta T6C 4G9

Chère Mme Michaud,

Il me fait le plaisir d'écrire ces quelques lignes au sujet de mademoiselle Francine Gratton pour être considérée comme candidate dans le programme bilingue Administration des Affaires. Pendant les six dernières années, Francine est inscrite dans la classe de français dont j'ai le plaisir d'enseigner. Durant cette période, j'ai remarqué beaucoup d'amélioration en elle, autant aux niveaux académique que personnel.

Académiquement, Francine est une étudiante appliquée, toujours prête à aller plus loin pour parfaire son éducation de langue française, autant à l'oral qu'à l'écrit. Depuis sa première année, son français s'est beaucoup amélioré autant à l'oral qu'à l'écrit. J'ai remarqué une progression constante de la qualité de son expression, de son débit, de son intonation etc. En plus, Francine est issue d'une famille francophone, ce qui lui permet de parfaire son discours oral. Académiquement, Francine est toujours au-dessus de la moyenne de la classe. Depuis six ans, sa note oscille entre 80 et 90%, ce qui est exceptionnel d'après mes standards.

A mon avis, mademoiselle Gratton est parfaitement capable d'accomplir les exigences du programme d'étude offert par votre institution d'enseignement. Francine est également très active au sein de la communauté scolaire. Toujours prête à donner son aide aux divers comités du secondaire, par exemple le comité de graduation, le conseil d'école, les activités parascolaires et sportives et j'en passe. Francine est également impliquée dans la vie culturelle de l'école en participant à différentes productions théâtrales, au festival culturel «Artstravagenza », et j'en oublie.

En guise de conclusion, il me fait le plaisir de recommander mademoiselle Francine Gratton pour le programme bilingue dans votre établissement scolaire. Si vous avez des questions concernant Francine comme candidate supérieur, il me ferait le plaisir d'y répondre personnellement.

Sincèrement,

Thérèse Dubois
Coordinatrices des programmes de français
ESB - École Secondaire Bilingue

Sample Reference Letter: Immigration Application Reference

29 November 20XX

Canadian Consulate General
Immigration Regional Program Centre
3000 HSBC Center
Buffalo, NY 14203-2884

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter pertains to Emily Aye's employment with Career Services at Edmonton University. Emily has been employed by Career Services since September 2003 as a Career Advisor. Specifically, she worked part-time (approximately 12 hours per week) from September 2003 to April 2004, from September 2004 to April 2005, and from September 2005 to present. She worked full-time (35 hours per week) from May to August 2004 and May to August 2005. In total, she has worked over 2,200 hours at Career Services from September 2003 to early November.

Emily's main responsibilities as a Career Advisor include:

- Delivering workshops and presentations on a variety career and employment-related topics
- Advising students one-on-one with respect to their career and work options, resumes and cover letters, and interview skills
- Providing customer service in the Career Resource Centre
- Conducting research on career and employment-related topics
- Assisting clients with utilizing print and electronic resources
- Assisting with the delivery of career forums and career fairs

Emily's job performance has been exceptional. Clients who have attended her workshops and met with her one on one comment specifically on her ability to address their needs in a professional yet empathetic manner. Emily is also highly regarded by her co-workers for her strong teamwork and leadership skills. She has strong public speaking and interpersonal communication skills and, although she speaks with an accent, she very easy to understand. I firmly believe that Emily has and will continue to make a positive contribution to Canada.

Career Advisors are not paid an annual salary but on an hourly basis. In terms of benefits, they receive four percent vacation pay. Emily's pay, including vacation pay, for the time she has worked at CaPS is as follows:

- September 2003 to April 2004 (amount)
- May to August 2004 (amount)
- September 2004 to April 2005 (amount)
- May to August 2005 (amount)
- September to October 2005 (amount)

If you require further information regarding Emily's employment with Career Services, I may be contacted at (phone number) or (email address).

Sincerely,

Esperanza Torero
Career Education Coordinator

**Sample Reference Letter:
Graduate School Reference**

13 January 2006

Admissions Committee
Division of Applied Psychology
Alberta University
Edmonton, AB T2T 1T1

Re: Reference for Bradley Calumba

I am writing in support of Bradley (Brad) Calumba's application for the Masters program in Applied Psychology. Brad worked with Community Services part-time as a Life/Skills Coach from September 2006 to April 2007. I was his direct supervisor. Brad's key responsibilities included planning and facilitating workshops and working one-on-one with clients.

Brad came to Community Services with minimal experience in the life/skills education field. He demonstrated a strong ability to learn quickly the information and skills he required to be effective in the performance of his duties. In my experience I have found that working part-time and studying full-time is something that not all students do well. Brad was able to manage his academic, work and other commitments effectively.

Brad's performance of his responsibilities was excellent. The feedback he received from students who attended his workshops and from those he worked with one-on-one was consistently very positive and provides evidence of his strong teaching and interpersonal communication skills.

Brad worked very well with his peers and supervisors. Many of the workshops are co-facilitated. Brad's peers could always count on him to meet his commitments, and work in a co-operative and professional manner. Personally, I have always found Brad very mature, personable and conscientious, and to have a very positive attitude about work. I would not hesitate to hire him if he applied with Community Services in the future.

If you would like further information about Brad's employment with Community Services, I may be contacted at (780) 444-4444.

Sincerely,

Ara Ban
Client Services Manager

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