

Writing Reference Letters for Students: for Employment and Graduate School

Note: When You Can't Write a Positive Recommendation

If you have difficulty honestly framing a compelling letter for a candidate, then it's fine to decline the request.

It's actually better to say no than it is to write a letter that doesn't strongly endorse the person you are recommending.

You can simply say something vague like you don't feel totally comfortable writing a recommendation or you don't have the type of exposure that would enable you to supply the right kind of letter. Here's how to turn down a recommendation request.

Here's what you need to know to write an effective letter supporting a job applicant.

Consider What Type of Letter You're Writing

If you're asked to provide a reference for a specific job, you should write the letter with the requirements of that particular job in mind. Read the posting or job description carefully, looking for specific skills and knowledge that you can include in the letter for your candidate. In your letter, note where there is a match between the applicant's qualifications and the job's responsibilities.

With a general recommendation letter, focus on the types or category of jobs for which the person is applying. Your examples in this type of letter will be broader, and less specific.

Collect Information Before You Start

Ask the person for whom you are writing to supply you with a copy of the job posting and their resume or curriculum vitae (CV) before you begin composing your letter.

It can also be helpful to review their cover letter to see how they pitch their qualifications for the job.

When you are writing a more general recommendation, ask the subject of your letter to outline their targets for employment. Ask them for an example or two of jobs they are applying for. Also ask them to share their most marketable assets for that type of work, especially ones you may have observed in your relationship with the person you are recommending.

The more information you have about the jobs or types of jobs the candidate is applying for, the more effective your recommendation can be.

What to Include in a Recommendation Letter

The first paragraph of your letter should explain how you know the person for whom you are writing. Reference your job title and the individual's job title at the time when you interacted, as well as the nature of your relationship, including whether you supervised the person you're recommending.

Typically, you would also include the length of time you have known the person.

Body of the Letter

The body of your letter should reference the skills, qualities, areas of knowledge, and other assets of the person you are recommending. Start by making a list of the strengths which you would like to convey in your recommendation.

Then compose sentences that show proof of your assertions — this will make your letter more credible. Provide specific examples of instances where you observed the candidate using skills they are highlighting to the hiring manager.

This might consist of a project or role where they successfully applied a certain skill. Citing accomplishments where value was added to your organization and describing the strengths which enabled the person to generate those results can be particularly compelling.

Letter Closing

In your closing statement, it can be very effective to mention that you would hire the person again. Or, mention your belief that the person would be an outstanding addition to the company.

Share Your Contact Information

As part of your close, you can also share a telephone number and email address with a mention of your eagerness to share additional perspective on the candidate. That way, potential employers can easily get in touch if they have any follow-up questions.

Formatting Your Letter

Here are guidelines for formatting recommendation letters including length, format, font, and how to organize your letters. If this is your first time writing a letter of recommendation, you may find it helpful to use a template.

Sending Your Letter

You may be asked to send the letter to the person you are recommending or directly to the employer. If you're sending via email, attach a copy of your letter to the email message as a PDF or Microsoft Word document. The job posting or the employer will typically specify how the recommendation should be sent and who it should be sent to.

➤ **Sample Job Recommendation Letters for Students**

Dear Mr. Gonzales,

I have had the pleasure of supervising John Brown for the past three years while he worked in various capacities for the career office at Star College. Mr. Brown has performed superbly in every role he took on in the office and has far exceeded expectations for productivity. I have worked with over 200 student workers during my tenure with the office and John stands out as one of the very best.

In fact, staff view him more as a professional colleague than a student worker and have assigned complex and responsible tasks to him which would not usually be entrusted to students. These tasks include responsibility for maintaining our recruiting database which has a very confusing and complex structure.

John is extremely well organized and detail oriented in his approach to tasks. He masters projects quickly with his keen intellect and carries them out in a precise and error free manner. We are often pleasantly surprised when John finishes a task ahead of time and marvel at how he has done so with such thoroughness and efficiency.

John was originally hired in a reception role given his strong interpersonal and communication skills. He quickly learned about an extensive array of resources and services available to our clients and excelled at sharing information with his peers. His consistently positive attitude and air of calm confidence enabled him to comfortably interface with students, alumni, employers and other clientele. Based on his strong performance in that role, he was hired as our summer office assistant where he provided outstanding administrative support to the entire staff. John worked independently on office projects and took the initiative to improve systems when it was warranted. The following fall we hired him again to help manage our recruiting database based on very successful summer stint.

I give John my highest recommendation as an extremely bright employee with an extraordinarily positive attitude. I am confident he will perform better on the job than you can anticipate or imagine. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about this exceptional young man.

Sincerely,

Jane Doe
Director, Career Office
518-580-5888
JaneDoe@college.edu

Dear Mrs. Tillerson,

I have had the pleasure of working with Alicia Jones for the past two years while she served as an assistant in the Office of Career Development, where I hold the position of director. Alicia has consistently shown the ability to establish an excellent rapport with many different constituents including students, alumni, administrators, and staff. She is genuinely interested in helping others and provides service in a consistently positive and helpful manner. She also knows how to comport herself when things go wrong.

For instance, during last year's Career Services Day, Alicia hosted the New Student's Desk and demonstrated grace under fire when the computers went down and pamphlets and other crucial material were no longer available. She managed to reach our IT department on short notice and they were able to rectify the situation without delay.

This is but one example of how Alicia is self-assured and calmly handles stress, something very common in a busy office.

Alicia is also exceptionally responsible and is always the first to volunteer and help out with any task from the mundane to the challenging. I have rarely met a student employee over the past ten years upon whom I can rely on as much as Alicia. Initially, Alicia was hired to man the front-desk because of her strong interpersonal and communication skills. She quickly learned the parameters of the office and displayed such a strong work ethic I promoted her after just four months. Not surprisingly, she quickly learned the inner workings of her new position and before long excelled in her new role, completing tasks either on-time or ahead of schedule.

I think very highly of this young, bright woman and recommend Alicia without reservation for employment, whether it's full-time, part-time, or just seasonal work

Please let me know if you have any further questions about this outstanding young woman. Also, I am available to talk to you by phone or video conference with you to further explain Alicia's qualifications in more detail.

Ms. Jane Doe
Director, Office of Career Services
Address
Phone
Email

Here's what you need to know to write an effective letter supporting a graduate school applicant.

Strong letters of reference are vital for individuals who wish to enter graduate school. When employees decide to further their education – often because they wish to increase their value to their employer by learning new skills – they face strong competition not only for a place in a good graduate program, but also for the financial aid resources that they may need to cover the costs of tuition, books, and supplies.

If you, as a manager, are asked to provide a reference letter for an employee, keep in mind that the details you provide are going to be important in helping your employee stand out from the other graduate school applicants. So give some thought to what you believe to be your employee's greatest strengths. In your letter, you should provide:

- A short summary of your history with the employee (How and when did you meet? How long have you worked together? In what capacity?)
- A detailed statement of the characteristics that you believe will enable your employee to excel in his or her graduate studies
- A few specific descriptions of the contributions your employee has brought to your organization; and
- A strong closing statement of endorsement for your employee's candidacy.

Make Sure You Have Enough Information

If you do not know the student well, but still want to write the letter, you can request that the student provide you with background materials, including the student's resume, transcript, and a few paragraphs about goals and accomplishments. Busy teachers and guidance counselors who frequently receive requests to write recommendation letters may want to develop a questionnaire for students to fill out.

You might also ask the student which other teachers he or she has asked for a reference, and then have a private chat with them about the student's strengths and potential.

Before you write the letter, find out some specifics about why the student needs it. A recommendation letter for dental school differs greatly from a letter in support of an application to art school or a letter for a summer job opportunity. Also, make sure you know the date the letter needs to be written by. If at all possible, write the letter within a day or two of receiving the request. This will avoid the letter being buried and forgotten under piles of essays or exams that need to be graded.

Here you can find comprehensive information on reference and recommendation letters, sample letters of recommendation and reference lists, how to ask for a reference, and how to use references.

There is also information on what reference checkers can ask about you and what previous employers can disclose.

➤ Reference Letter Sample for Graduate School

To Whom It May Concern:

It is my honor to recommend Marie Chan for matriculation into the Graduate program at Rochester Institute. I have had the pleasure to know and work with Marie for the last six years. She first worked with me as an undergraduate intern in the software development organization at XYZ in Syracuse, NY.

Following her internship with me and her graduation from Rochester Institute, I was fortunate enough to keep track of Marie's career so that, when the opportunity arose, I was able to recruit her to her current position here at ABCD. The same characteristics that convinced me to hire her away from her previous employer, B Company, are also why I am happy to provide her with an unqualified endorsement for graduate study.

Marie brings to all of his activities energy, enthusiasm, and commitment. This is to be expected in any successful member of an entrepreneurial organization, and in this regard, Marie fits in well. Be it in she parsing of intricate algorithms in a billing system, she crafting of an object hierarchy, or the establishment of best practices with an emerging technology, Marie consistently delivers high-quality software for our organization. This speaks to his overall intellect and ability to learn, attributes that will serve her well in his graduate study.

While Marie is a relatively junior member of our organization as measured by tenure, she quickly established herself as a go-to person in the product domains in which she has worked. She has been ever-willing to work with members of our organization to share his knowledge and expertise, most notably as a presenter for presentations on product functions. She has a deep-rooted spirit of helpfulness that, coupled with his quick grasp of subject matter, speaks well to his potential as a teaching assistant or instructor.

What I find most engaging in Marie's character are his wide-ranging interests outside of software. Two of his abiding interests are game theory and economics. She can be quickly engaged in an in-depth discussion, for instance, of the rationale behind EZ-Pass, the lack of rationality of the financial markets, or the optimal approach for making a few quid on the super-bowl. Marie's broad range of interests speaks well to his potential as a researcher, both in bringing a wide range of theory to tshe research at hand, as well as carrying forward new hypotheses of interest to researchers.

Marie is a valued member of our organization whom we have learned we can rely on, regardless of the difficulty of the task to hand or the novelty of the challenge. Sher combination of intelligence, commitment, perseverance, creativity, and a compassionate character will certainly make her a valuable member of any academic program.

I encourage you to look favorably upon her application.

Sincerely,

Lucy Lindow

Title

Company

Phone

Email