

School of International and Public Affairs

Columbia University

Office of Career Services

REFERENCES AND LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

References are people who can be contacted by potential employers to verify your work history and to inquire about the quality of your work on jobs or in classes. References are almost always checked before you are offered a job, except in the most informal of hiring situations. Usually potential employers want to talk to your references by phone; sometimes they just ask to read letters of recommendation. Here's what you need to know on the subject of references:

- ***Who should your references be?*** References can be former or current employers, internship supervisors, or professors. They should be people who know you and your work well enough to comment on it and should be people who will speak highly of you. When getting a reference from a job or internship, choose someone who was in a position of authority over you and who viewed your work firsthand. Don't, for example, use the company president as your reference unless that person worked closely with you. Also, do not use co-workers in positions equal to yours as their objectivity may be subject to question and their opinion not as highly valued.

You should not use relatives as references, but in some cases it might be appropriate to use an old family friend as a reference. If the friend works in the field in which you are applying for jobs, and if they know your personal qualities well enough, they can be a valuable reference.

- ***Prepare a reference list.*** Type a list of at least three current and/or former employers or professors who can be contacted as references. Put your name, address and phone number at the top of the page as you would on your resume, then type the heading "References". List employers' names, company/ organization name, address, phone number, and dates you worked for them. Keep copies of this list on hand to give to prospective employers when they request references. Some job announcements, particularly those in want ads, ask you to send references with your resume. In most cases, however, you will not be asked for references until after you have interviewed and are being considered for the job. It is a good idea to contact all the people on your list to let them know someone may be calling them and to refresh their memory of the work you did for them. You can also send them your resume to further refresh their memory (this may also be a good source of job leads).

- ***Deciding how many references to have on hand:*** Typically, three to five references are required when you are being considered for a job. In informal situations, fewer references may be requested, and in more formal situations, prospective employers may ask to speak to (or receive a letter from) all past employers. If certain past employers cannot be found, that is okay. Just omit them from your list, or indicate why they cannot be reached (e.g. "company closed").

- ***Getting letters of recommendation:*** Ideally, you should request a letter as soon as a job, internship, or class ends, but you can also contact former employers or professors whom you may not have talked to in a while. When asking for recommendation letters, it is a good idea to give some guidelines for the letter, either in writing or when talking to the references. Remind them of your job duties and point out any successes or accomplishments you had on the job or in class so that they will highlight all important points in their letter. Sometimes you may be asked to write a draft of the letter for them. Although this may seem very awkward, it happens more often than you think. This is a great opportunity to take an objective look at your performance and (hopefully) write a solid letter of recommendation. Remember, you should be honest, but it's no time to be modest!