

How to find good references

Graduate school programs typically require two or three references as part of your application package. Some course-based professional programs will require one academic reference and one professional reference. Each program sets its own criteria for reference letters, so be sure to check its requirements.

It is important to identify these potential references at least one month in advance of applying to graduate programs.

Types of referees

Academic references should be permanent professors on the university's faculty.

Professional references are individuals you worked with (such as a former employer) who can write positively on your relevant work experience.

If you are an Indigenous student and would like to use community references for your application, contact the Graduate Program Administrator (GPA) in your program of interest on how to proceed securing them. [The Native Centre](#) may also be able to provide guidance with questions about community referrals.

Selecting your referees

Your referees will write letters speaking to your academic performance or work experience and your ability to do well in graduate school. You will want to make yourself well known to your potential referee so that they can provide as detailed a letter as possible.

When selecting an academic reference, pick smaller, more recent courses where you interacted regularly with the professor or course instructor. Lab sessions or seminar classes are ideal, because they allow you ample time for face-to-face interactions with the course instructor.

If you're returning to school after a long absence you should try to re-acquaint yourself with previous course instructors. Be sure to re-establish contact early on and keep up a steady correspondence to remind them who you are. If possible, try to send them any copies of assignments/tests they have marked to jog their memory.

Try to re-establish contact with your former department/program. They will have records of your attendance and staff may be able to help you re-establish contact with former professors, especially if they have retired or are no longer working in the same department.

Making contact

A crucial part of securing references is to ask them specifically if they could write “a strong reference letter” for you. They will tell you if they cannot write a strong letter (for whatever reason), and if this is the case then you are far better off to move on and pick a different referee.

When contacting your referees, include a note that gives the following information:

- The purpose of the reference
- The rationale for pursuing your studies and your expected goals
- Your key skills and talents that relate to these goals
- The procedure for submission of the letter: A link will be sent to each writer’s email to fill out a reference form online

Include your updated curriculum vitae, transcripts and any parts of your application you have written (study proposal, writing sample, for example).

Follow-up

Don’t be shy. Ask for a personal meeting or phone call during which you can answer any questions the referee may have. *

A good reference letter will:

- Emphasize your strengths.
- Provide specific anecdotes of things you have done that make you stand out.
- Address your potential as a graduate student.
- Be concise and clear by providing context though specifics. Superlatives without support are meaningless.

Thank your referees

You should thank the referee for taking the time to submit a reference, regardless if you are successful or not.

*Much of the above information has been adapted from “Writing a Letter of Recommendation.” By Laura Bonetta, Ph.D. Addendum to “Making the Right Moves: A Practical Guide to Scientific Management for Postdocs and New Faculty”, copyright 2006 by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and Burroughs Welcome Fund