

Helpful Hints for Writing Letters of References

Writing a reference letter (letter of recommendation) is a serious task. It could mean the difference between a person being hired or rejected. What follows are some guidelines to assist you with preparation of these important letters. Please return the letter promptly, because a job may depend on its punctuality.

- Do not disclose any information regarding an individual's educational record without written consent of the student. A faculty member should verify a student's consent when an employer contacts the faculty member and advises that the student has given permission for a verbal reference.
- Many individuals believe that when an individual waives his/her right to review a written reference, the reference writer becomes immune to a charge of defamation. This is not true! An individual cannot waive the right to a truthful reference, whether it is written or verbal.
- Give honest and factual information. Be able to document all comments made about the candidate with details from your observations of his/her work. When you prepare letters, base comments on personal knowledge of the individual and back up any comments with related examples.
- Support your statements about candidates by explaining the incident or circumstances surrounding the statement. Avoid giving personal feelings or opinions. If you make subjective statements or give opinions, clearly identify them as opinions and not as fact.
- If the particular position for which the applicant is applying is known, relate the reference to the specific position and to the work that the applicant will perform. Refer individuals for employment opportunities based upon the individual's job related skills from your interactions/observations of the individual.
- Do not base a statement of performance on stereotypes about an individual. For instance, do not say, "For a woman, she excels in math." Do not include information that might indicate the individual's race, color, religion, national origin, age, handicap, citizenship status, sex (unless evident by the individual's name), or marital status.
- State in the reference letter, "This information is confidential, should be treated as such, and is provided at the request of (name of individual), who has asked me to serve as a reference." Statements such as these give justification for the communication and leave no doubt that the information was not given to hurt a person's reputation.
- If "to whom it may concern" reference letters are requested, document that this is the type of reference requested and that the individual takes responsibility for disseminating the letters to the proper persons.
- Avoid answering questions that are asked "off the record" or over the telephone, unless the individual is aware of the discussions and has given consent for such conversation.