

# LSE staff guide to writing references



At some point it is likely that you will be asked by employers to supply references for students that you have taught or for whom you are a personal tutor. There are points of good practice which it will be helpful for you to be aware of, primarily in order to be fair and transparent towards the student but also to avoid any potential litigation due to negligence in the writing of a reference.

This guide will give you some background as to why employers use references, an idea of what a reference looks like and what it might contain, a list of general do's and don'ts and finally some further resources.

## **Why do employers use references?**

Most employers use references. Invariably an employer will contact you to supply a reference for two reasons: firstly, to verify what an applicant has said at the various stages of the selection process (CV, application form and interview) and secondly, to gain your opinion on the applicant.

## **What will a reference look like?**

Employers will vary; some will simply write and ask for your opinion on the student's character and ability. Others will be more precise and ask for factual details such as the student's course marks throughout their degree as well as more subjective questions, for example, questions about the student's ability to work effectively in a team. Some of these details will have been observed by you, others reported by the student. For example, you might be able to comment on the student's presentation skills having directly seen them perform in a seminar, but have to rely on the student telling you what they have done in their role as treasurer of the ballroom dancing society.

You will be asked to comment on some, if not all, of the following areas:

### **Personal details**

Verification of degree course, date of graduation, your relationship to the student.

### **Academic abilities**

Course grades, predicted final result, overall quality of work.

### **Skills and competencies**

- Working with others – how has the student interacted with peers and academics, how do they perform in a team?
- Self management - ability to meet deadlines, willingness to work hard, persistence in face of obstacles.
- Communication – listening skills, presentation skills (for example in seminars), written and oral effectiveness.
- Problem solving – finding solutions, thinking logically or laterally, using ingenuity to get round difficulties.
- Organisational – Taking responsibility, setting objectives, planning, prioritising, meeting deadlines.
- Analytical - critical thinking, ability to synthesise material from different sources

### **Personality**

Comments on general character, integrity, honesty, reliability, self confidence, drive, motivation, maturity and decisiveness.

### **Extra curricular involvement**

Have they been involved in clubs and societies? What role did they undertake? Have they been volunteers? Been a student mentor? Are there achievements outside of the LSE they could refer to?

### **Miscellaneous**

Career aspirations.

## **General do's and don'ts**

### **Do...**

- Respond to reference requests as quickly as possible. Consider ways in which you can ensure a quick response if a request for a reference arrives whilst you are away from the LSE. Not responding can result in the student's application suffering.
- Give the reference in the manner requested by the employer. For example, use a pro forma if it has been supplied.
- Be fair. You have a duty of care to the person asking for the reference and to the person about whom you are writing.
- Explain to students how you are going to approach writing their references and ask to be kept informed of the positions for which they are applying.
- Be consistent in how you give references. Give a similar length and similar level of detail to all students.
- Try to support with factual evidence. For example "participated regularly and confidently in seminar discussions and showed an ability to debate points of disagreement clearly and maturely" is better than simply saying "excellent communication skills".
- Tend to make only positive points. If there are areas of concern these should have been discussed with the student previously and documented.
- Consider showing the student the reference before you send it.

### **Don't...**

- Refuse to write a reference without giving clear reasons to the employer (an unexplained refusal will be implied as a negative opinion).
- Use coded or ambiguous language. If you have a definite opinion express it clearly.
- Express opinions that are not relevant to the position applied for. In particular, avoid giving weaknesses that are not relevant to the job. If you do refer to a weakness provide a positive counter balance.
- Give opinions that are defamatory.
- Give opinions that you aren't competent to give. For example, "he will be a great success in the job" would be better phrased as "I believe he is well suited to the job."
- Give telephone references unless it is absolutely unavoidable. Telephone conversations can be misheard, misunderstood and poorly transcribed. If you do give a telephone reference confirm the information you have supplied in writing.

### **Further resources**

University of London, Career Group: *Writing References* leaflet (pdf)

<http://www.careers.lon.ac.uk/files/word/WritingReferences.doc>