



Suggested Guidelines for Writing References

Updated November 2008 Principles for Professional Practice Committee

Written References

1. Provide a written reference only if a student has given your name as a reference.
2. When you prepare reference letters, be factual; do not editorialize. Avoid vague statements.
3. Respond to the specific inquiry about the student or job applicant. Direct the response to the particular person who requested the information.
4. If a “to whom it may concern” reference letter is requested, document that this is the type of reference requested and that the student or job applicant takes responsibility for disseminating the letter to the proper persons.
5. Relate references to the specific position for which the person applied and the work that the applicant will perform.
6. A good practice is to avoid giving personal opinions or feelings. However, if you make subjective statements or give opinions because they are requested, clearly identify them as opinions and not as fact.
7. If you give an opinion, explain the incident or circumstances upon which you base the opinion.
8. Be able to document all information you release.
9. State in the reference letter, “This information is confidential, should be treated as such, and is provided at the request of [name of student or applicant], who has asked me to serve as a reference.” Statements such as this give justification for the communication and leave no doubt that the information was not given to hurt a person’s reputation.
10. Do not include information that might indicate the individual’s race, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, citizenship status, sex (unless by the individual’s name it is obvious), or marital status.
11. Before disclosing educational information covered by FERPA (e.g. student's transcripts, GPA, grades, social security number, etc.), you must obtain the written consent of the student. Failure to obtain such consent may constitute a violation of FERPA.

Verbal References

1. Do not disclose information regarding a student’s education record without the written consent of the student.
2. Informal “lunch” discussions or “off the record” telephone conversations with prospective employers regarding a student’s performance should be avoided unless the student is aware of the discussions and has given approval for such conversation.
3. Information given should be factual, based upon personal knowledge/observation of the student through direct contact with the student.
4. If any employer contacts faculty and advises the faculty that a student has given permission for the faculty member(s) to give a verbal reference, verification of this permission should be obtained from the student before giving any information to the employer. Such verification can include a copy of the student’s signed employment application listing the faculty as a reference, or a verbal confirmation by the student, followed by written confirmation.
5. In addition, those giving verbal references should follow “Written Reference” guidelines 2 through 10 (excluding guideline 4).