



General Job Search Strategies

Who are Your Recommenders?

When applying for jobs or internships, you may be asked to provide references or letters of recommendation. If you are planning to apply to graduate or professional schools, letters of recommendation are essential to preparing a strong application. The key is to plan ahead: most people will not write a letter or serve as a reference unless they know you well enough to judge your capabilities for success in the workplace or academia. While at Ohio State, you should establish relationships with 3-4 people, each of whom can be a recommender for you. The word “recommender” in this tip sheet refers to people who will either serve as a reference or provide you with a letter of recommendation.

Applicable Career Communities:



A *reference* is an individual willing to provide an employer with a positive view of your work ethic, abilities, skills, knowledge, and general character. Normally, the reference will be contacted directly by the employer (usually by phone or e-mail) with specific questions regarding your background.

A *letter of recommendation* (sometimes called a letter of reference) is a personalized letter regarding your skills and accomplishments, directed to a specific school or employer, from an individual who has agreed to support your application.

Identifying Potential Recommenders

When doing reference checks, employers prefer to contact sources they consider to be impartial. Options for you to consider are:

- current or former supervisors at job, internship, or volunteer sites
- faculty members who can describe how you compare to other students in terms of in-class participation, course work, or other accomplishments can also be used;
- campus staff (e.g., advisors) with whom you have worked closely.

Choose those who can emphasize relevant aspects of your skills, knowledge areas, and experiences. For example, those seeking admission to graduate programs in the sciences should have at least one recommender who is familiar with their research skills. Similarly, those looking for employment in law enforcement should have recommenders who can attest to their moral character, assertiveness, etc.

You will need to form relationships with potential recommenders over time. This can be done by making regular use of a faculty member’s office hours and/or volunteering to assist with their research, as this will allow them to understand more fully your strengths. Similarly, you can request to meet periodically with workplace supervisors to get feedback on how you can be a better employee or, if they have experience working in your target career field, to get their advice on ways you can increase your qualifications, etc.

Don’t make the mistake of focusing exclusively on lining up recommenders with prestigious position titles. It is better to have a detailed recommendation from someone who knows you well, appraises you positively, and will take the time to write a thoughtful evaluation.

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Contacting Each Potential Recommender

Well in advance of when you'll be submitting applications, contact each person and politely ask if they are willing to be included on your list of references or provide a recommendation letter in the future. It's best to initiate such discussions at least a month before you plan to start applying to graduate/professional schools or actively searching for a job/internship.

Most people will not agree to be a recommender unless they think they can make positive statements about your qualifications. With those who agree, pay careful attention to how they respond to your request. Do they seem genuinely interested in helping you? Do you sense any reservations on their end (either because they have a busy schedule or may not know you well enough)?

It is best to ask in such a way that anyone who is hesitant about serving as a recommender can easily address their reservations with you. Consider using a query like, "If you feel you know me well enough, I'd greatly appreciate a recommendation letter from you. Will you be able to provide a letter for me?"

Getting Organized

For those who have agreed to speak to reference checkers, send them an email that includes your resume, list of references (see sample on the last page of this document), a description of the position you are seeking, and copies of other pertinent application materials (e.g., cover letter). Do not assume a reference will remember your career goals or specific experiences contributing toward your set of skills. Give them the information they need to be a strong reference! Send them your materials at least one week in advance of when they will need it.

For those who have agreed to provide recommendation letters, you should send all of the documents listed above as well as your personal statement and a description of the specific program to which you are applying (it is fine to include screen shots from the school's web site).

Consider including other materials that will help your recommender advocate for your academic capabilities (e.g., list of academic honors, research papers, etc.). Send them your materials at least three weeks in advance of when they will need it.

Many graduate schools maintain their own systems for collecting recommendations that require your recommenders to complete an online form and upload a letter of recommendation. The same holds true for employers like Teach for America that process thousands of applications during each recruitment cycle.

When submitting your applications, you will be required to provide information about the people who have agreed to be your recommenders. You will also have the option to indicate if you are waiving your access to view the letters submitted by your recommenders. A confidential recommendation is one that describes your capabilities and potential for success in the graduate program or the employment position you are seeking, but you do not get to read it. Even when not a hard and fast application requirement, confidential documents are usually preferred by selection committees.

When asking a faculty member to write a letter for you, they may question you about use of a dossier service. Dossier services are sometimes used by faculty and graduate students who are seeking academic positions. At one time, use of these services were also a core component of the process undergrads followed when seeking admission to graduate and professional schools. Now that the majority of graduate and professional programs either use recommendation systems maintained by their own universities or the consortiums they are affiliated with (e.g., LSAC), few undergrads will benefit from setting up a private dossier service to support their applications. Grad students are encouraged to research the value of using dossier services like Interfolio, especially if they are pursuing academic positions in disciplines (e.g., the humanities) where the norm is to apply to dozens of faculty or instructor positions at a time.

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General Guidelines

- Do not give the name of any individual as a reference without their prior approval.
- Do not list family or friends as references.
- Often an individual is advocating for several others at the same time. If you make the process easy for your recommenders, they will likely make the time needed to provide you with a strong endorsement.
- Take your list of references to interviews. If an employer is impressed with your interview and ready to proceed to the next step, having the list will move the process along and demonstrate your motivation to get the job. At the close of the interview, pull out the list and simply ask, "Would you like a copy of my references?"
- It is possible that an individual will deny your request to be a reference or provide a letter of recommendation because it is against their company policy.
- If you are planning to take a gap year after graduation and before applying to graduate or professional schools, obtain agreements from recommenders *before* you leave Ohio State. The longer you wait, the harder it will be for people to remember specifics about your personality and other factors that are not typically described in resumes and other documents. Because of the preference for confidential letters, your request will be for them to write the letter before you graduate to have on file for when they get a request for the letter from the programs to which you plan to apply.
- Some employers use LinkedIn as part of their candidate screening process. If any of your current or former supervisors have profiles on LinkedIn, request to connect with them. Once connected, they may elect to use the LinkedIn tool that allows them to endorse your various skills.

Communicating with Your Recommenders


After someone agrees to be a recommender, send them a quick thank you note. If you haven't already done so, send them the materials described in the Getting Organized section above.


Most online application systems will notify you when a recommendation letter has been received. For those not using systems to manage the collection of recommendation letters, it's a good practice to check in with them a couple weeks prior to the deadline to ensure your materials were received. If not, contact your recommenders with a gentle reminder.

Keep in mind that many situations may arise for these individuals, causing delays in completing the process. For instance, depending on the time of the semester, faculty may be busy developing exams or grading papers. If someone cannot provide a letter by the application deadline, it's possible that the organization you are applying to will give an extension – especially if all your other materials have been received.

When you have good news to share related to your job search or admission to a post-baccalaureate program, let them know, and show appreciation for their role in helping you get there.

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Sample:

BRUTUS BUCKEYE

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614/292-7055

REFERENCES:

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614/292-2310
Beaker.xx@osu.edu
(thesis research advisor)

Ms. Helen Reader
Librarian
The Ohio State University Library
1858 West Neil Avenue
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614/292-6446
Reader.xx@osu.edu
(former supervisor)

Mr. Don Frye
Manager
Champps Kitchen & Bar
1827 Olentangy River Road
Columbus, OH 43212
dfryer@champps.com
(current supervisor)

NOTES: THIS IS AN INDEPENDENT DOCUMENT FROM YOUR RESUME. BE SURE TO INCLUDE YOUR NAME AND IT'S PURPOSE IN THE FILE TITLE [E.G., BRUTUS BUCKEYE REFERENCES.doc]

INCLUDING INFORMATION ABOUT HOW EACH REFERENCE KNOWS YOU WILL MAKE IT EASIER FOR THE REFERENCE CHECKER TO PRIORITIZE WHO TO CONTACT.

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