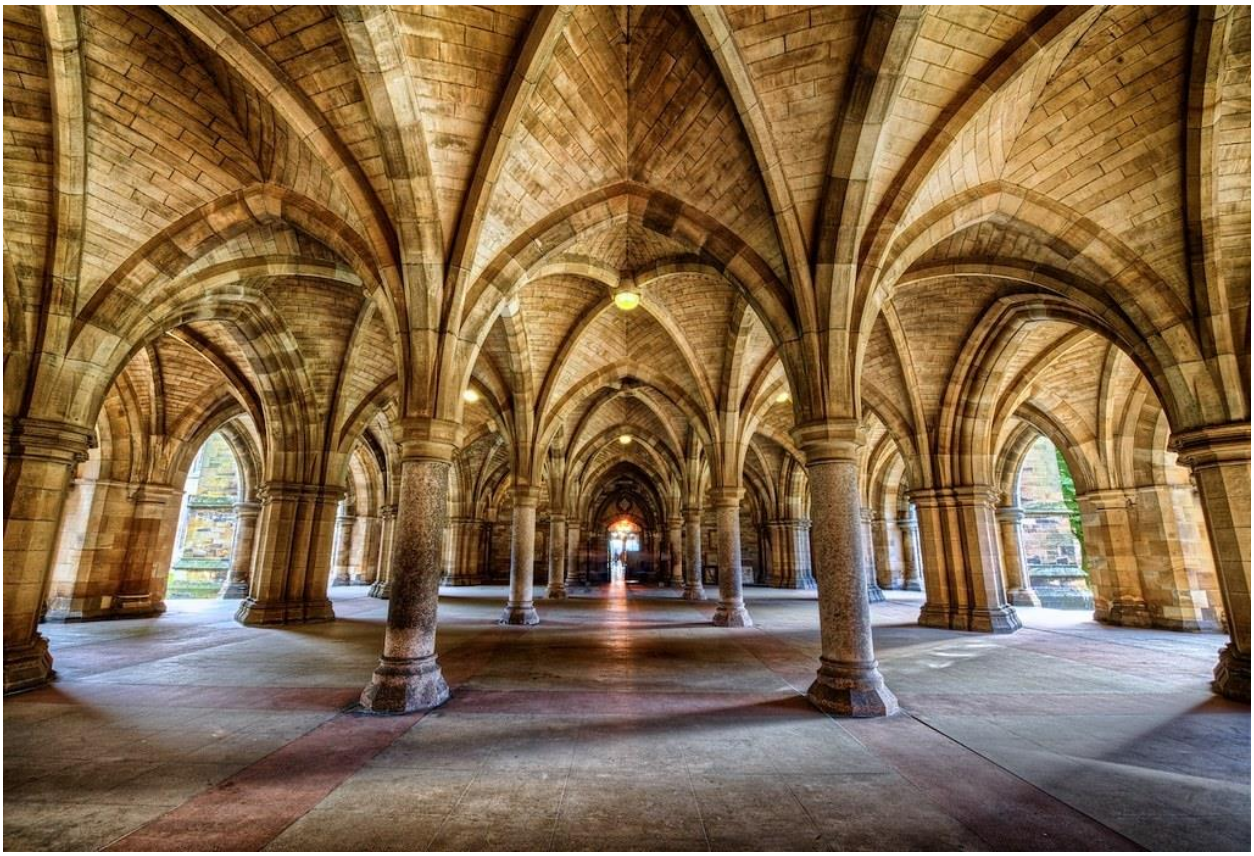


Writing References for Students and Graduates

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Purpose of this guide

This guide is to help you with the process of writing an academic reference. Inside, you'll find lots of tips on what makes a strong reference, examples of formats you can adapt, and advice on how to handle trickier situations.

You should use this guide alongside the **Reference Request Form** that we have designed and ask that each student or graduate completes when asking for a reference. The form will give you the key details you'll need such as programme information, grades, dissertation title, career goals,

and other relevant experiences. These details will make it much easier to write a well-informed, personalised reference.

As you go through the guide, we'll point out where the **Reference Request Form** can help such as providing factual information, highlighting achievements, or giving examples of personal qualities. To make things smoother, you might find it helpful to keep this form open while you work through the guidance.

Key Principles of Reference Writing

Before looking at specific reference types and templates, it is important to keep in mind some core principles that apply to *all* reference writing. These principles are designed to help you write references that are *clear, fair, and useful* to the student or graduate, while ensuring that the information you provide is accurate.

References play a significant role in admissions and recruitment decisions and a well-written reference can significantly strengthen a student's application, while a poorly written or delayed one may disadvantage them. The **Reference Request Form** has been created to support you by providing the factual details, examples, and context you need, *but how you frame that information still matters.*

The following principles cover good practice in reference writing: being clear and evidence-based, responding promptly, finding the right balance of length and tone, respecting confidentiality, and avoiding ambiguous or discriminatory language. They also highlight when it may be better to decline a request, and how to ensure fairness across multiple students. Keeping these principles in mind will ensure that your references are professional, credible, and genuinely supportive of students/graduates as they take their next steps.

Be clear, evidence-based, and fair

A strong reference avoids vague vanilla adjectives such as 'good', 'nice', or 'capable'. Instead, support your statements with evidence drawn from your experience with the student. For instance, rather than saying *"Maria is a good communicator"*, write *"Maria demonstrated strong communication skills by leading group discussions during her level 2 laboratories, presenting complex material in a clear accessible way to her peers"*. Try to ensure that your comments are fair and reflect what you can reasonably evidence.

Respond promptly to meet tight deadlines

Reference requests often come with very tight deadlines, particularly graduate schemes and postgraduate applications. Missing deadlines can result in the student's application being automatically rejected and therefore it's important to reply within a week of the request or sooner if you know the deadline is close. If you feel like there might be a delay, let the student or those requesting the reference know so they can plan accordingly. In our **Reference Request Form**, guidance for students/graduates is to contact you directly to ask for a reference at least *two weeks* before the application deadline (and therefore in plenty time to provide the reference when it is requested).

Keep length balanced (about 1 page of A4 or 3-5 paragraphs)

Most references should be long enough to provide substance, but concise enough to be read quickly. A page of A4 (around 400-500 words) gives room to confirm key facts, comment on academic and personal qualities, and end with a clear recommendation. Anything shorter may appear dismissive; much longer, and your main points risk being lost. Think of your reference as a focused endorsement rather than full on biography!

Avoid sensitive or coded language unless essential and permission is granted

Do not include information on personal matters such as health, disabilities, or family background without explicit student consent. We've included an additional context box in the **Reference Request form** for students to express any personal matters that need to be taken into consideration.

You should also avoid 'coded' language that could be misinterpreted (e.g., *"Karen would benefit from close supervision"* which could be read as a negative). If you must comment on areas for development, try to do so constructively and frame them as opportunities for growth.

Maintain Confidentiality and store securely

References are confidential documents. You should therefore store drafts and final versions in a secure location (ideally a password protected folder on your University One Drive), and never share them without the student's permission. Always send references directly to the requesting organization.

Use specific examples rather than vague praise

Employers and admission teams want to see evidence of how the student has demonstrated their skills. Replace generic comments like *"James is hard-working"* with concrete examples: *"James consistently submitted assignments ahead of deadlines while balancing responsibilities as a class representative, demonstrating excellent time management and reliability."* Examples make your endorsement more credible and memorable.

However, it can sometimes be difficult to remember specific examples to support your statements (particularly if you are asked to give a reference to someone who wasn't your dissertation student or haven't had close contact with). As such, the **Reference Request Form** asks students which skills/criteria that they would most like emphasized and requires them to provide examples from their studies. Hopefully, the examples students give will help jog your memory and can be validated.

Be honest about the limits of your knowledge

If you can only comment on certain aspects of the student's performance (e.g., attendance at class, progress in completing course work), state this clearly. A transparent, limited reference is more valuable than a vague or misleading one.

Avoid discriminatory content

Never (ever) comment on protected characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, disability, marital status, or religion. Focus on professional, academic, and personal attributes relevant to the opportunity.

Clarify if declining

If you feel unable to provide a supportive reference, it is better to decline the request rather than submit something overly bland or negative. Inform the student politely and as early as possible so they have time to approach someone else. In some cases, you may feel that another colleague is better placed to write the reference — for example, an Adviser of Studies or a dissertation supervisor who knows the student's work in greater depth. The **Reference Request form** asks students to list who else they have approached for references, giving you a clearer picture of who may be best placed to support them.

Maintain consistency across students

Where possible, aim for a similar tone, length, and level of detail across references you provide. This helps avoid unintended bias and ensures fairness, particularly when writing for a cohort of students.

What to include in a Reference

Once you have agreed to provide a reference, it helps to have a clear structure in mind. A good reference isn't just a collection of kind words, it should provide factual details, academic evidence, and personal insights that together create a rounded picture of the student/graduate.

The **Reference Request Form** is designed to give you most of the information you need including details of the student's programme, dissertation, career goals, and skills they would like highlighted. However, the value of your reference lies in how you bring that information to life with your own perspective, observations, and professional judgement.

1. Your relationship to the student

Begin by clarifying how you know the student and in what capacity. This sets the context for your comments.

Example: "I have known Chiara for three years in my role as Senior Lecturer in Psychology, where she took three of my modules and I also supervised her honours dissertation on the lived experiences of University students with visual impairments."

2. Factual details

Confirm the essentials: programme of study, dates of attendance, and any award/classification achieved. This grounds your reference in verifiable facts.

Example: "Emily studied on the MA Psychology programme at the University of Glasgow from 2020–2024 and graduated with a First Class Honours degree."

3. Academic performance

Comment on the student's academic abilities, including subject knowledge, intellectual curiosity, or research skills. You can refer to specific modules, projects, or assessments.

Example: "Ashleigh produced consistently strong written work, achieving an average of 68% in her final year. Her dissertation on the social identity of superheroes demonstrated sophisticated critical analysis and advanced qualitative research skills."

4. Transferable skills

Employers and admissions teams value skills that apply beyond the academic context. Draw attention to attributes such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving, organisation, leadership, and digital literacy.

Example: "In group projects, Eugene showed excellent leadership and collaborative skills, often taking initiative to organise tasks and ensure all voices were heard. He also demonstrated strong oral communication when presenting findings clearly to peers and staff."

5. Personal attributes

Highlight character traits that make the student suited to further study, employment, or volunteering. These might include resilience, reliability, empathy, adaptability, or motivation. Link qualities to behaviours so the reference is evidence-based rather than vague.

Example: "Alexia is highly reliable and empathetic. While supporting peers during group assignments, she demonstrated patience and understanding, ensuring quieter voices were included. Her resilience was particularly evident when she successfully managed competing deadlines during exam season without compromising the quality of her work."

6. Development and potential

Highlight how the student has grown during their time at university and what this suggests about their future capacity. Evidence of resilience, independence, or ambition can be particularly powerful here.

Example: "Over the course of his degree, Jamie grew in confidence, moving from a quiet participant in seminars to a capable discussion leader. This progression reflects his capacity to adapt and develop, qualities that will support his future postgraduate study."

7. Closing recommendation

End with a direct endorsement. Avoid ambiguous wording and state clearly whether you recommend the student and for what purpose. Include your contact details should the recipient wish to follow up.

Example: "I strongly recommend Maxine for the MSc in Occupational Psychology. I am confident she will make a valuable contribution to the programme. Please feel free to contact me at [email] if you require further information."

Reference letter samples by type

Different opportunities call for different kinds of references. A student applying for postgraduate study, for example, will need a letter that emphasises their academic performance and research skills, while a graduate seeking employment will benefit from a letter highlighting transferable skills and workplace readiness.

The **Reference Request Form** is designed to help you tailor your reference to the specific context. It provides details such as the type of role or programme, dissertation title, career goals, and examples of achievements or experiences the student/graduate would like you to highlight.

Each template is broken into four clear paragraphs, with notes on what to include and example wording. You can adapt these to your own writing style and to the specific details provided by the student through the Reference Request Form.

Postgraduate Study Reference

Postgraduate applications often ask referees to comment on a student's academic ability, research skills, and potential for advanced study. The **Reference Request Form** provides key details such as the course the student is applying to, their skills, degree classification, and how their future career goals align with the course. You can use this to highlight how the student's achievements and qualities align with the postgraduate programme.

Example Template:

Section 1: Acknowledge details of the request

Confirm you are writing at the student's request and name the programme/institution. This shows you've tailored the reference and responded directly to the information in the form.

"I am writing this reference letter at the request of Amira Khan, who is applying for the MSc in Clinical Psychology at the University of Edinburgh."

Section 2: Academic performance with evidence

Explain how you know the student, then provide evidence of their academic strengths, such as grades, dissertation work, or research ability. This supports the advice to be **clear, fair, and evidence-based**.

"I have taught Amira for three years in my role as Senior Lecturer in Psychology. She achieved consistently high marks, including 70% in Advanced Cognitive Psychology and 72% in Research Methods. Her dissertation, 'Exploring the Impact of Accessible Sport Facilities on the Participation of Students with Disabilities', demonstrated strong research design skills, ethical awareness, and critical analysis."

Section 3: Transferable skills and personal qualities

Draw attention to skills and attributes that will support postgraduate success, linking qualities to behaviours. The Reference Request Form will tell you about the programme's focus, helping you select relevant examples.

"Amira has shown independence and resilience, particularly during her dissertation research when she managed multiple participant interviews alongside other coursework. She also displayed intellectual curiosity by engaging with material beyond the core syllabus, demonstrating genuine enthusiasm for her subject."

Section 4: Clear closing recommendation

Conclude with a direct endorsement, avoiding vague or coded language. Make it clear you believe the student is well-suited for postgraduate study.

"I therefore strongly recommend Amira for the MSc in Clinical Psychology. Based on her academic performance and research potential, I am confident she will excel in postgraduate study and make a valuable contribution to your programme."

Job Application Reference Letter

Employers are looking for transferable skills and evidence of reliability. The **Reference Request Form** will give you the details of the job role, and examples of relevant experiences. Use these to select qualities you can endorse with evidence (e.g. teamwork, organisation, leadership). If needed, you may also request the student/graduate's CV to support your reference.

Example Template:

Paragraph 1: Acknowledge details of the request

Confirm you are writing at the student's request and name the job role/organisation. This ensures clarity for the employer and shows you've responded promptly to the specific request in the form.

"I am writing this reference letter at the request of Sarah McIntyre, who is applying for the role of Graduate Data Analyst with Glasgow City Council. I have known Sarah for three years in my role as academic advisor and module leader. During this time, Sarah demonstrated strong problem-solving and analytical skills, particularly in her advanced statistics and research methods coursework."

Paragraph 2: Academic performance and transferable skills with examples

Describe how you know the student, then connect their academic achievements to workplace-relevant skills (problem-solving, teamwork, leadership). This demonstrates fairness and consistency by grounding comments in observable performance.

"Sarah has transferable skills that would be highly valuable in the workplace. For example, she showed excellent teamwork and organisation when leading her group during a Level 3 quantitative research project. She coordinated tasks, ensured deadlines were met, and produced a clear, data-driven presentation that was praised for both accuracy and clarity."

Paragraph 3: Reflect on student's personal qualities and link to behaviours

Different job roles require different personal qualities. Use the **Reference Request Form** to guide you. For instance, you might highlight resilience, adaptability, or communication.

"Sarah remained calm and professional when presenting under pressure, demonstrating confidence and clear communication skills. She is also highly reliable, consistently submitting work ahead of deadlines, even while balancing part-time employment alongside her studies."

Paragraph 4: Clear closing recommendation

State your endorsement explicitly and provide contact details. This supports the principle of clarity and balance in references.

"I therefore strongly recommend Sarah for the Graduate Data Analyst position at Glasgow City Council. Based on my experience, she would make an exceptional contribution to your team. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information."

Scholarship/Funding

Scholarship and funding bodies want to know about a student's academic achievements, potential for future success, and wider contributions (e.g., leadership, volunteering, community engagement). The **Reference Request Form** will provide details of the award, the student's motivations, and evidence of relevant activities. Use this information to connect the student's qualities to the values of the funding body.

Paragraph 1: Acknowledge details of the request

State clearly why you are writing and name the scholarship/funding programme. This ensures clarity and shows you have tailored the letter.

"I am writing in support of James O'Donnell's application for the Carnegie Trust Postgraduate Scholarship. I have known James for four years in my role as Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology and Neuroscience at the University of Glasgow."

Paragraph 2: Academic performance with evidence

Comment on academic strengths and achievements, using details from the form (e.g., grades, dissertation, awards). This ensures your comments are evidence-based.

"James has excelled academically throughout his degree, graduating with First Class Honours in Psychology. His dissertation, 'An Investigation into Anxiety Interventions for University Students with Autism Spectrum Conditions', achieved a high First (82%) and demonstrated advanced research design, critical evaluation, and sensitivity to working with diverse populations."

Paragraph 3: Wider contribution and alignment with award values

Highlight relevant personal qualities, extracurricular involvement, or leadership. Link them to the values of the funding body (community service, leadership, research potential). You may find the link in the completed **Reference Request Form** to help give you more information about the funders mission/priorities.

"Beyond his academic success, James has shown outstanding commitment to supporting others. He volunteered as a peer mentor for first-year students, providing guidance and encouragement

to help them settle into university life. This reflects his leadership, empathy, and strong sense of social responsibility, qualities that align closely with the Carnegie Trust's mission to support students who make a positive contribution to their communities."

Paragraph 4: Clear closing recommendation

End with a direct endorsement, avoiding vague or coded wording.

"I therefore strongly recommend James for the Carnegie Trust Postgraduate Scholarship. His academic record, research ability, and commitment to community engagement make him an excellent candidate for this award. Please feel free to contact me if you require further information."

Volunteering

Volunteering organisations usually want reassurance that the student/graduate is reliable, trustworthy, and has the personal qualities to contribute effectively, particularly if the role involves working with vulnerable groups. The **Reference Request Form** will give you details of the volunteering role, as well as examples of relevant experiences. Use these to highlight commitment, teamwork, and interpersonal skills, linking them to concrete behaviours you've observed.

Example Template:

Paragraph 1: Acknowledge details of the request

State that you are writing in support of the student's application for a volunteering role, making clear your relationship to the student.

"I am pleased to provide a reference for Emily Fraser, who is applying to volunteer with the Prince's Trust mentoring programme. I have known Emily for three years as her Adviser of Studies at the University of Glasgow."

Paragraph 2: Evidence of commitment and reliability

Comment on the student's engagement and reliability, drawing on examples from the form (e.g., society involvement, mentoring, outreach work).

“Emily has always demonstrated strong commitment and dependability. During her degree, she volunteered as a peer mentor for international students, where she consistently attended meetings, offered practical advice, and provided emotional support to new arrivals.”

Paragraph 3: Personal qualities linked to behaviours

Highlight the personal qualities relevant to volunteering, making sure to connect them to observed behaviours.

“She is empathetic, approachable, and an excellent communicator. For example, she showed great patience and understanding when supporting a student who was struggling with cultural adjustment, ensuring they felt welcomed and included in the university community.”

Paragraph 4: Clear closing recommendation

End with a positive and unambiguous endorsement.

“I therefore strongly recommend Emily as a volunteer for the Prince’s Trust. She combines reliability, compassion, and effective communication skills, and I am confident she will make a valuable contribution to your programme.”

Difficult Cases

Poor performance or disciplinary issues

As a general rule, if a student has performed poorly or has a disciplinary record, you should not include this in a reference unless it is directly relevant to the role or course applied for *and* you believe you have a duty of care to disclose it (for example, where safeguarding or professional integrity is at stake).

In most cases, the best practice is to decline the request rather than write a negative or ambiguous (“coded”) reference. A weak or critical reference can disadvantage the student more than a polite refusal. If you feel unable to provide a supportive reference, let the student know clearly and as early as possible so they can approach another referee.

Example wording to decline due to poor performance/disciplinary issues:

"Dear {Student Name},

Thank you for asking me to provide a reference. Unfortunately, I do not feel able to provide a reference for your application on this occasion. I would encourage you to consider approaching another member of staff who may be better placed to support your application."

Limited knowledge of the student

There may be occasions where a student you are not very familiar with asks you for a reference. We provide students with guidance on who to approach, and the **Reference Request Form** asks them to reflect on their relationship to their chosen referee. However, sometimes a student may have no alternative but to ask someone who does not know them well enough to provide detailed comments.

In these circumstances, the Reference Request Form will give you factual information (programme, dates of study, classification, and achievements) to help you shape a short reference. Under such conditions, you should make it clear in your letter that you are limiting your comments to factual details.

If you feel that even with this support you cannot provide a strong or meaningful reference, it is perfectly acceptable to decline the request. It is better to step back than to provide a vague or unhelpful reference that may not serve the student well.

Outdated knowledge of the student

Example reply to the student:

"Dear {Student Name},

Thank you for getting in touch with your request for a reference. As I have not taught you directly, I am not in a position to comment in detail on your academic performance or personal qualities. However, I would be happy to provide a short factual reference confirming your enrolment on the {programme name}, your dates of study, and your degree classification.

If you feel this would be helpful, please let me know and I will prepare the reference."

Example wording for factual reference:

"I can confirm that {student name} was enrolled on the {programme name} from {year start to year end} and completed the degree with {classification}. I am unable to comment in detail on their broader performance or personal characteristics, as I did not teach them directly."

Sometimes a former students may return years later requesting a reference. If too much time has passed since you taught them, you may not be able to provide a reliable or current assessment of their abilities.

Example wording for politely declining a previous student:

"Dear {Student Name},

Thank you for your request. As it has been some time since you completed your studies, I don't feel able to provide a current reference that would support your application effectively. I would encourage you to seek a more recent referee who can speak to your current skills and experience."

When you might not be the most appropriate referee

Students sometimes approach a course lead or programme director because they hold a senior role, even if another academic has worked with the student more closely. In these cases, it is both reasonable and helpful to suggest that another member of staff — such as a dissertation supervisor or adviser of studies — may be better placed to provide the reference.

The **Reference Request Form** asks students to indicate who else they have approached for a reference. You can use this information to guide them towards a referee who knows their academic performance, research, or personal qualities in greater depth.

This does not mean you cannot contribute at all. If appropriate, you might still provide a short, factual reference (confirming programme details, dates, or overall performance) while encouraging the student to obtain a fuller, more detailed reference from a colleague who has taught or supervised them more extensively.

Example wording to provide factual reference for the student:

"Dear {Student Name}

'I'm happy to confirm your degree details, but your dissertation supervisor/academic advisor would be in a stronger position to comment on your research skills and academic potential. Their input will likely carry more weight with the selection panel."

About the Authors

About the authors:

This guide was written by Dr. Steven McNair and Dr. Jamie Murray

For students:

If you are a student and have any questions or feedback about the material presented in this Sway guide please feel free to contact us via email or in office hours. Also, do let us know if you come across any broken links and I'll make sure they are updated. I'm also happy to hear suggestions on what further information or guides you think might be useful in supporting your employability.

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