

Reference Letter Guidelines



Many times, faculty and staff members will be asked to write a letter of recommendation for a student or student employee. Sometimes the request will be to evaluate a student's work in class or their performance from a job. Whatever the case may be, when writing these reference letters, it is important to keep in mind certain guidelines that will protect the reference as well as the student.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has laid out some specific tips and guidelines for writing References and Referrals, and OSU Career Services agrees with many of these. This guidesheet will highlight many of these tips but a complete list and supplemental article can be found at www.nacweb.org

For faculty and staff reference providers, the following suggestions should be followed:

1. Relate references to the specific position for which the person applied and to the work that the applicant will perform.
2. Avoid giving personal opinions. If you make subjective statements or give opinions because they are requested, clearly identify them as opinions and not as fact. If you give an opinion, explain the incident or circumstances on which you base the opinion.
3. Don't guess or speculate-if someone asks you questions regarding personal characteristics about which you have no knowledge, state that you have no knowledge.
4. Be factual while not to editorialize. Avoid vague statements.
5. If you are unaware that the job applicant has named you as a reference, ask the prospective employer for verification that the person has given consent for the reference.
6. Avoid lunch discussions or "off the record" telephone conversations with prospective employers regarding a person's performance. There is no such thing as "off the record."

Many who have been called on to provide reference letters want to know if they will "get in trouble." On top of these general suggestions, faculty and staff reference providers also have some ethical guidelines that should be considered:

1. Discuss the type of reference that you will provide with the person who asks you to be a reference. If you cannot provide a good reference, be honest with the individual.
2. Information given should be factual, based upon personal knowledge / observation of the person through direct contact with the person or obtained from the person's personnel or student record.
3. State a confidentiality notice in the reference letter to the employer observing that the information given should be confidential and is provided at the request of the student. 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.
4. Do not include information that might indicate an individual's race, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, citizenship status, sex, or marital status. Opinions of performance should not be based on stereotypes.

By following these general guidelines for reference letters, faculty and staff members will be more likely to provide a solid and ethically sound letter of recommendation for any of their students. And as always, please refer to your organization's or department's guidelines as well. If you would like any more information regarding this or a variety of other job-related topics, please contact OSU Career Services. We are located in 360 Student Union and can be reached at 1-888-OSU-HIRE or check out our website at www.hireosugrads.com