



Reference Letters and Reference Lists

- A *reference letter* may be requested by a graduate/professional program and asks the reference to explain why the candidate would be a good fit for the program. You will generally need 2-3 reference letters total.
- A *reference list* is a list of 2-4 people and their contact information you submit with a job/internship application. Employers will then reach out to these people for a short phone call/email about your candidacy.

□ **Determine your best representation**

Depending on the purpose of a reference letter or list (ex./ employment vs. graduate school applications), you will need to determine the best person(s) to be your reference. Generally, all references should be professional in nature (no friends or family members) unless otherwise noted. Appropriate references may include professors, advisors, coaches, supervisors, and in some cases, colleagues. Choose people who know you well and can speak to your strengths and skills, especially to match the context of the letter/list.

□ **Gather appropriate documents for references to review**

In order for the reference to best communicate why you would be a good fit for the position or program, they will need information about your experience and future goals. A resume is a good start for them to learn about your experiences, as well as a personal statement/cover letter to learn more about why you are interested in the particular program/position. Other helpful documentation could include a transcript, other reference letters, or a list of accomplishments/skills that you would like them to highlight.

□ **Allow yourself enough time**

Faculty/administrators get many requests each semester to write reference letters; do not wait until the last minute to ask them. Generally, a month's notice is plenty of time. If the person will serve as a reference for employment, ask them ahead of time if it's OK for you to use them as a reference. Alert them of when they should expect a phone call and from what company/position. It is acceptable to follow-up with a gentle reminder to your references if you haven't heard back from them. You may want to have back-up references just in case.

□ **General format of letters and lists**

Reference letter writers should follow instructions given by the specific program/position for which you are applying. If no prompt is given, you should determine what information you would like the person to highlight and communicate this to them. A career consultant will also be able to help you brainstorm this during an appointment.



Reference lists should include the following regarding the reference:

- name
- current title and organization
- your relationship to the reference
- address
- phone number
- email
- You may also choose to describe the context to which this person can speak about you and your skills. See examples below

(Always use the same header that is used for your resume and cover letter)

Example 1

CHLOE CHEMISTRY

412-268-2064

chloechemistry@andrew.cmu.edu

REFERENCES

Dr. Lawrence Laboratory

Professor of Chemistry
Former professor of Inorganic Chemistry course at CMU
Carnegie Mellon University
5000 Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 555-5555
[llaboratory@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:laboratory@andrew.cmu.edu)

Dr. Bunsen Burner

Director of Research
Former Principal Investigator for Research Assistant position
Big Research Institute
123 Experimental Street
New York, NY 65432
bburner@bri.org

Ms. Connie Sultant

Lab Manager
Former supervisor for Research Assistant position
Carnegie Mellon University
5000 Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 123-4567
csultant@andrew.cmu.edu



Example 2

CHLOE CHEMISTRY

412-268-2064

chloechemistry@andrew.cmu.edu

REFERENCES

Dr. Lawrence Laboratory

Professor of Chemistry
Former professor of Inorganic Chemistry course at CMU
Carnegie Mellon University
5000 Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 555-5555
[llaboratory@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:laboratory@andrew.cmu.edu)

Dr. Laborator has served as my academic advisor for the past three years. He is able to address my academic achievements and problem-solving abilities.

Dr. Bunsen Burner

Director of Research
Big Research Institute
123 Experimental Street
New York, NY 65432
bburner@bri.org

Dr. Burner served as my internship supervisor for the past two summers. He is able to address my analytical, and technical skills in a laboratory setting.

Need additional help?

Meet with your Career Consultant or check out our website for more help.