

How to Ask for a Reference Letter

by Jodi Glickman | 12:27 PM April 7, 2010

In the real world, getting a reference letter is far more difficult and often a source of much anxiety. Whom to ask, how to ask, what to say?

But getting an outstanding reference letter is entirely within your control and easier than you think, even if you don't have a benevolent benefactor at your back. Here are three tips to ensure your mentor, former boss, or academic counselor writes you a rave review:

1. Highlight their qualifications
2. Provide a template
3. Offer a "no questions asked" policy

Let's look at each of these individually:

1. HIGHLIGHT THEIR QUALIFICATIONS

When reaching out to ask for a letter of reference, explain up front and center why it is that you value that person's opinion and respect their professional expertise enough so that you chose them (of all people) to vouch for you in your next professional endeavor.

Beyond mere flattery, show why you think that person is uniquely qualified to accurately assess and communicate your personal contribution to your future organization. Why did you enjoy working for them, and why do you value their opinion? Why do you look up to them? How do the qualities match your own, or speak to the authority you want your recommendation to convey?

2. PROVIDE A TEMPLATE

It's almost impossible to get a good reference letter from someone if you don't provide the tools necessary for them to actually write a good letter. It's also terribly inconsiderate not to give ample guidance. The last thing anyone wants to do is spend hours or days thinking about and drafting a letter which you yourself could have composed far better and more readily in about half the time.

Providing a template, therefore — an outline, bullet points, or even a fully-baked draft — of what you'd like the reference letter to say is the most effective (not to mention generous and thoughtful) approach to asking for a letter of reference.

The goal isn't to put words into your former colleague's mouth or to co-opt her into vouching for you in an untrue or disingenuous manner; it's simply to do some of the work for her and provide all of the pertinent data points that you'd like included in the letter. Moreover, as boastful, bragging or full of yourself you may feel writing your own referral, often people will be even more generous than you will when talking about your skills and contribution to an organization. So go ahead and toot your own horn.

When you are asking for a recommendation, take the time to create a template for the person writing the recommendation. This can be a draft of

the letter itself or a simply a roadmap: a set of points that provides them with an outline as well as the context and content for their note.

A strong ready-made template hits upon three key points: your motive, your credentials and the impact you expect to have on your new organization. To be most effective, you need to answer three key questions:

1. Why are you applying for the position or academic program? (Motive)
2. How or why are you uniquely qualified for the position? (Credentials)
3. What will you contribute to your new organization or program? (Impact)

Let's see what this might look like in a particular case:

Alex Wallace was a human resources professional who worked in financial services for ten years. Alex earned her MBA from a top tier school and most recently covered the multimedia team at Reuters. After two years at Reuters, Alex decided to make a major career shift and jump from human resources to broadcast journalism. Alex reached out to the head of HR at her former employer to ask for a letter of reference for her application to Columbia's Graduate School of Broadcast Journalism. She included the following bullet points in her template to assist her former boss in writing in the letter:

Motive: Why Are You Applying?

Throughout my career, I've lived and worked abroad have always had a strong interest in business journalism and international affairs.

My work at Reuters has inspired me to make a leap I've considered for a long time and which I believe will tie together many diverse aspects of my career.

Alex gave both a personal reason and a professional motive: her work in HR in the news industry ultimately inspired her to make a change. Why are you applying for a new job or program? Are you hoping to learn a new skill, make an industry, firm or career switch, or are you, like Alex, following a life-long dream of doing something you've always wanted to do but were never sure how to?

Credentials: How Are You Uniquely Qualified?

I have a strong background in both finance and business issues, having spent ten years on Wall Street supporting finance professionals and two years at Reuters learning about the news industry

In my current role, I am responsible for managing employee issues related to ethical standards of stories, quality of writing and knowledge of key figures and trends in the news industry

I am strong writer, a skilled presenter and a quick learner; I am able to discern the important and relevant pieces of information from large amounts of data and make decisions quickly and effectively

Alex highlighted both her relevant experience and her inherent skill-set. Together, these combine to make her an excellent candidate for the program. As you think about your own qualifications, consider coursework and academic programs, relevant work experience, extra-curricular or volunteer activities, or even your own natural talents or strengths that will be better utilized in your new endeavor.

Impact: What Will You Contribute?

I believe that the reporting and writing classes will give me the tools I need to become an outstanding broadcast journalist

With my quick grasp of the issues and my in-depth understanding of finance and news organizations, I hope to bring a unique perspective to the program

Alex's impact — her unique perspective — could even be more compelling if she talked about how her news coverage would be different or unique from what exists today. Regarding your own contribution, what is your vision of how you will impact your new organization? Do you have new ideas, better ideas, a different way of thinking about things or a richness of experience that will impact your new environment?

At the end of the day, your goal is to give your former boss or colleague a clear-cut outline of what to include in your reference letter. By providing a thoughtful and well scripted template, you'll greatly increase the chances of getting your reviewer to agree to write the letter of reference and make that letter of reference communicate and convey exactly what you want.

3. "NO QUESTIONS ASKED"

Finally, once you provide your reviewer with a useful template and make it clear that your intention is to make this process as painless as possible for her, then it's time to hand over the reins and offer a "no questions asked" policy. First, give your colleague an easy "out" to decline your request for any or no reason. Then, assuming she agrees, give her ample leeway to change, modify or edit your letter as she sees fit. You want to convey a sense of trust in her and give her an opportunity to write a letter she is entirely comfortable with.

LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT WHAT THIS REQUEST MIGHT ACTUALLY LOOK LIKE:

Highlight their Qualifications

Dear John,

Hello, I hope you are well. I am writing to ask a huge favor — I'm applying for a senior marketing position with Merck and I was hoping you'd consider writing a letter of recommendation on my behalf. I always appreciated your perspective and judgment while working together. You have so much credibility within the product development space that I thought you'd be a perfect person to act as a reference.

Provide a Template

I have included a list of bullet points along with a draft letter you might consider using as a template. I'd like to make the process as easy as possible on you and I know it's hard to recall details about the many different projects we worked on together in 2007 and 2008.

"No Questions Asked"

If for any reason you don't feel comfortable writing a letter on my behalf, I completely understand. If you are willing to do so, however, please feel free to take the attached sample letter and use it as a template however you see fit. I have tried to address my

core strengths as a strategic thinker and team player and I have highlighted several marketing campaigns I'm particularly proud of. To the extent that you'd like to make any changes or modifications to the letter, please go ahead and do so. I trust that you'll include only those topics you feel comfortable commenting upon.

Further, I would welcome the opportunity to see a copy of the letter, but I of course understand your position if you'd like to keep it confidential.

Finally, finish your request with all the grace and charm you can muster — thank the other person profusely for their time and help and offer to make yourself available for any further questions he may have.

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Jodi Glickman is a speaker and founder of communication training firm [Great on the Job](#). Her book [Great on the Job](#) is out, and she is also a contributor to the *HBR Guide to Getting the Right Job*. Follow her on Twitter at [@greatonthejob](#).