

## **Best Practices for Seeking References / Reference Letters**

### *Queen's Law* **Career Services Office**

In most cases, your professors are pleased to provide you with letters of references. However, preparing good letters often requires a considerable investment of time.

To ensure that you are receiving the strongest letters possible, and that your professors are using their time wisely, the Career Services Office recommends that you follow the reference request process below.

Not all faculty members will require all of the steps / information we have outlined, and most faculty members will appreciate that, for reasons beyond your control, you may at some point require a letter on short notice. Please use your discretion and judgment in applying the process accordingly. This information is meant to help you develop a professional approach to interacting with Queen's Law faculty and other professionals – not to dissuade or discourage you from asking for references!

Please do not hesitate to let the Career Services Office know if you have any questions.

#### **A. Reference Request Process**

1. Think carefully about whom you should consider asking to act as a referee for you. For more on this issue, please see part B below.
2. Determine whether you need an actual reference letter or whether it would be sufficient to include your referee's contact information as part of your application package. In many cases, contact information is sufficient, so please confirm before you ask for a reference. For more on this issue, please see part C below.
3. Ask politely. Asking someone to be a referee for you is a serious request and should not be done in passing at a social event. Call or email your potential referee to ask for a time when you can meet to discuss the possibility of a reference.
4. At the time of the request, and without waiting to be asked, provide your potential referee with the following:
  - a copy of your résumé - this should be a polished, updated version, listing your extra-curricular activities, awards, etc
  - a current list of grades - most faculty members are satisfied with a typed list, but you should confirm whether a copy of your official transcript is required
  - a list of the place(s) to which you are applying
  - information about the type of position (e.g. summer, articling, internship, etc.), and some idea of the type of work (e.g., litigation, family, criminal)

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- 1-2 lines explaining WHY you want that particular position (e.g., why litigation, why family, why criminal)

*If you require an actual reference letter, you should also provide:*

- a completed Reference Letter Request Form (see: <http://www.queensu.ca/accessandprivacy/index/FIPPAreference.pdf>).
- the date the letter must be RECEIVED by the employer, court, organization, etc

**\*A note about timing:** Please ensure that your referee has at least **7-10 days** to complete a letter. If you are asking your referee to forward the letter directly, add **at least 3 days** for delivery time.

- names and addresses of the employers to which you are applying

**\*A note about to 'whom it may concern' letters:** Individually tailored reference letters look more professional than generic 'to whom it may concern' letters. However, most employers outside of courts do not expect them.

Ask your referee what his / her practice is with respect to generic or individualized letters. Some faculty members do not provide generic letters – even to private employers, so if you are applying to a large number of employers, you might not be able to expect a reference letter for all of your applications from that referee.

If your referee does prepare a 'to whom it may concern' letter, be mindful of the date. Stale-dated letters look unprofessional, so avoid using anything that is dated before the previous semester. With appropriate notice, most of your referees will be happy to provide you with freshly dated letters as necessary.

Finally, some faculty members only provide confidential letters, i.e., you do not get to see the letter, it goes directly to the employer. Confidential letters must be personalized, so, again, there will be a limit to the number of letters you can expect from these referees.

5. Ask your referee if he / she would like to know the outcome of your application. This is a simple courtesy. Your professors invest a lot of time in the reference process, and they often appreciate knowing the outcome.
6. If you do not receive a reference letter directly (e.g., you pick it up from a professor's assistant), send the professor an email indicating that received the reference and thanking him / her.
7. If your referee expressed an interest in knowing the outcome, remember to let him / her know.
8. Finally, you should apply a similar process for any reference request, not just requests to Queen's Law professors.

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#### **B. Whom to ask?**

In deciding whom you should ask to be your referee, you must weigh several factors: how well the person knows you and in what capacity, how well known the referee may be, and how positive the reference is likely to be. A professor who has taught you in a large, lecture-based course will know less about you than one who has taught you in a seminar or supervised you in a clinical course or a moot. So, even if you received a higher mark in a lecture class, you may receive a stronger, more thoughtful letter from a professor who genuinely knows you from a seminar.

Unless you have extensive pre-law school or law-related summer work experience, your referees should, ideally, be law professors who know your work well. It may be difficult, of course, to have two or three professors who know your capabilities well, especially after first year. It is quite acceptable to use one referee from previous employment, especially if you had a very responsible or law-related position. In fact, if you have come to law school after work in another field, it may be wise to have one referee from that employment, provided you also have at least one academic reference.

If you are interested in clerking, you should begin in first year to consider which professors might be able to provide you with references. For clerkships your referees should, ideally, be law professors who know your work well, although for some courts you may choose to submit one letter from an undergraduate or graduate school professor. Reference letters from employers are rarely useful to the courts.

#### **C. Letter or Contact Information?**

Unless it is specifically stated in a job posting or on an employer's website, whether or not you include names of your referees only, or actual letters of reference, is a judgment call. Generally, letters are more likely to be useful when applying to more specialized or unusual employers, and less likely to be useful when applying to large firms that get 800 applications in fact, some of the larger Toronto firms have indicated that they find reference letters a real nuisance, and the Career Services Office advises students applying to second-year summer positions not to include letters unless they are specifically requested.

If you are including a list of referees contact information, the Career Services Office suggests that you include the list on a separate page following your résumé. Don't bother with the statement References Available Upon Request - either include a list of names or don't mention references. Note that you must always ask your referee before using his or her name! Anyone who agreed to act as a referee some time ago should always be contacted again.