Reference and Recommendation Letters

Version 1

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While there is a difference between a 'reference' letter and a 'recommendation' letter, these terms are often used interchangeably. Letters of recommendation are very specific, are normally requested or required, and they are always specifically addressed to an individual; whereas letters of reference are more general in nature and usually addressed to "Whom It May Concern.". 'Reference' letter is often the term used for employment purposes.

Requesting a reference letter

When deciding who to ask for a letter of reference, consider:

- Who knows you the best?
- Who thinks most highly of you?
- Who will be most beneficial for the target audience?
- Consider asking past employers, professors, student advisors for professional or academic references, and non-family members for a character reference if needed.

Give your referee plenty of notice and information.
Ideally you should give at least two weeks notice prior from the date the letter is needed.

Be considerate of the amount of time and effort your referee will need to spend.
Remember that your referee is doing you a *favour*. While requesting a straightforward reference or recommendation letter is acceptable, asking for something more complex or time consuming may cause them to avoid doing you a similar favour in the future.

Help your reference help you.
It may be helpful to provide the referee with an up-to-date copy of your resume, a copy of a specific job posting or details about the position, such as required skills, experience, qualifications and expected tasks. Discuss with them any important facts you want mentioned in the letter.

What if they turn down your request?

In Canada, there are legal implications for those who provide misleading references or recommendations. Because of this, many companies have developed guidelines for giving references that may disallow a potential referee from providing anything other than confirmation of your employment. As well, a potential referee may be hesitant due to lack of confidence in your job performance or how well they know you. In this case, it's in your best interest for you to find another referee. A less-than-positive reference usually does more harm than good.

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