

Reference



20
22

ABOUT PROJECT EDUACCESS

Access to higher education is a privilege most people from marginalised communities are systematically denied through cost, information, and dispositional barriers.

Launched in 2021, Project EduAccess is a modest attempt to improve inclusivity in higher education institutions and work towards removing these barriers for students from marginalized communities in South Asia.

We hope to achieve this by providing expert mentorship, support, and guidance to learners in South Asia.

In addition to running a mentorship programme and organising workshops, Project EduAccess also regularly develops content such as guides and documents that aid potential applicants in their university and scholarship application processes. This guide on references / letters of recommendation is a part of our series *Guides on Application Documents*.

DISCLAIMER

This guide, prepared for the benefit of prospective applicants, is a compilation of advice available on the websites of several universities and scholarship bodies. The information provided is for general informational and educational purposes only. All information is provided in good faith.

REFERENCES / LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

A letter of reference, as the name suggests, is usually addressed to the University's Admissions Committee or Scholarship Committee by a referee. It is a way for the university/ department/ scholarship panel to know and understand you better. Ideally, a reference letter should comment on your strengths as they relate to the graduate programme or scholarship requirement in a way that is both thoughtful and personal.

THE ROLE OF A REFEREE

A referee is typically expected to provide detailed and specific information in referring to their interactions with you and in their assessment of your work and performance. In this regard, it becomes important to reach out to someone who has known you for a longer and more meaningful time, rather than someone is a famous personality in your academic field, but you have only known briefly.

PREPARING

Different degree programs and scholarships require different kinds of references. In most cases, the department or scholarship guidance provides information on the type of referee they expect you to register to write your letter. They also specify the number of references required and the division across each type. It is very important to read the instructions carefully as they also hint at the kind of information that is expected a reference letter to cover. For example, the application guidance for the Bachelor of Civil Law at the University of Oxford states:

Academic references are strongly preferred; a professional reference will be accepted if you also provide two academic references, but if you are in a position to provide three academic references then it is recommended that you do so.

Similarly, the application guidance for the Rhodes Scholarship states the following:

You will need to provide a list of four (minimum) to five (maximum) people (your referees) who are willing to submit references on your behalf:

- i. At least three of your referees should be academics who have formally taught and graded you in your undergraduate (or, if relevant, postgraduate) studies and who can comment in detail on your academic ability and how well they think you would fare at Oxford.*
- ii. One or two referees should testify to your character and/or your involvement in extra-curricular/service or leadership activities.*

TYPES OF REFERENCE LETTERS

Referees are usually of two types: academic and professional. This difference is important as each speaks to different set of qualities and characteristics you possess. Both sets of reference letters help make your application holistic.

Academic Referee

An academic referee is usually a professor who you have interacted with in an academic capacity at your university (i.e. they should have formally taught and

graded you in a university setting). An academic reference should comment on the applicant's academic achievement, provide an assessment of any work you completed under their supervision, comment on your suitability for the course you are applying to, and provide any other information they consider relevant. While speaking to your academic abilities, an academic referee is expected to refer to specific interactions with you in classroom settings, or otherwise comment on where your capacity to learn, grasp, understand, introspect, and perform are reflected well. They should also speak to your interest in a certain field(s) – as it relates to the graduate programme you are applying for – and your motivations in pursuing that course/ programme, in relatively lesser detail.

Wherever relevant, the referee should also include the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as teaching that was missing or done remotely. The referee can also justify fluctuations in grades, and touch upon changes in circumstances specific to the individual, whether the student or their close family member was affected by illness or bereavement, or any other barriers that affected their academic engagement.

Professional Referee

A professional referee is someone you meet in a professional role, in your work life (which includes internships and voluntary work). A professional reference is typically expected to comment on the candidate's performance/ achievements in a workplace setting. They should ideally discuss the candidate's skills and competencies focusing on their performance of working in a team, problem-solving skills, communication skills, self-management (ability to meet deadlines and face obstacles), organizational skills and critical thinking ability. A professional reference will also comment upon the general character, integrity, motivation and reliability of the

candidate. It should ultimately comment upon the career aspirations of the candidate.

NEXT STEPS

Once you have the details of the reference required, here are some of the things you should do:

- Make a list of potential referees. This list can be longer than the number of referees required so you have back-ups in case those you reach out to first refuse or do not respond in time.
- You should identify referees as per the course/ university/ scholarship requirements. For e.g., professional referees might be good for certain scholarship applications, whereas they might not be well-suited for a university course application.
- Start discussing the application process and the need for a reference well in advance with your potential referees.
- Try to ask your potential referee in person or by email if they would be willing to support of your application. Remember that it is a request – it is important therefore that you are polite and professional in making this request.
- Do not shy away from reaching out to people for references. If in your considered view, a person had known you for a certain period of time and should be able to comment on your work/ academic capabilities in the manner expected by the university/ scholarship body, reach out to them without any hesitation!

- It is your responsibility to ensure that your referees submit their references by your chosen course deadline, and to keep reminding them as the deadline approaches.

CONTACTING YOUR REFEREES

- When drafting an email to a potential referee, it is important to provide all information relevant for them in one email. If you converse with them in person, follow it up with an email giving the below mentioned information.
- In the body of the email, provide as much information as you can about the course (all courses if you are asking them to write you a reference for multiple university applications) you are applying to and the reasons for your application. Include links to the course page so they can check the eligibility requirements themselves. Mention the deadline for each university application. Follow the same procedure for scholarship applications.
- Attach all relevant documents like your CV, draft statement of purpose (not compulsory), and transcripts (only to academic referee) in the email to be sent to your potential referee. This helps the referee align their letter with the narrative of your application, focusing on the things you focus on.
- Follow up with them regularly. It is always good to send reminder emails, that are kindly worded asking them to confirm their willingness to be your referee.
- Once a referee confirms, ask them for their institutional email IDs, as you may have to include this information in your application form. Ensure that the referees know that they have to send the reference from their institutional email IDs.

- Your reference should be submitted to the university's online reference system. Check up on your referee if they're having trouble navigating the system. In most cases, you will get an email notifying you when a letter has been submitted.

FORMATTING AND STRUCTURING

The following are the qualities of a good reference letter. These are important to keep in mind to assess the reference letters framed by your referees. Sometimes, they may ask you to frame them, in which case also these pointers become important:

- Try to keep it to 1-2 pages.
- The reference letter should be written in a formal letter format, with an institutional letterhead wherever possible.
- The first part of the reference letter should contain information about the referee. A short professional bio followed by their relationship with you. They will have to clearly indicate how long they have known you and in what capacity they have known you.
- The second part of the reference letter is their assessment of your performance in the work that you have done together, or you have done under their supervision.
- For an academic referee, this could be their judgment of your class performance, class participation, exam results, class rank, and any other work you have done in the university setting. They will make this assessment relative to your cohort, to indicate how you perform in relation to the average performance of the cohort.

- If the academic referee is aware of your work beyond the classroom, they can comment on such work as well. This helps indicate your ability to multi-task and perform well irrespective of other commitments. The reference letter can also include a description of your personal qualities which they appreciate or admire.
- A professional referee would speak to your personal qualities in a workplace setting, with specific examples. The qualities they speak to could include things like communication skills, research skills, leadership abilities, positive attitude, dedication, efficiency, commitment to quality and other relevant soft skills.
- Your referees may also choose to make reference to any adversarial circumstances you faced and how you dealt with them, in the knowledge of your referee.
- In the final part of the letter, your referees can include information about your current situation (for instance, if there's a gap between the application and your association with them).
- The letter should conclude with their recommendation. For e.g., "For these reasons, I recommend X's application for this course. They would be a worthy asset to any university."
- All reference letters should be in English, unless explicitly permitted by the department to be in a different language or accompanied by a certified English translation.

scan to stay connected



www.projecteduaccess.com

project 
eduaccess 