

Essential Guide to Securing References for a Job Search

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Whom Should I Ask?

- Current supervisors (expected by most employers, ideal because they can speak to your recent projects/skills)
- Past supervisors
- Co-workers
- People you have supervised
- Professors
- Managers at places where you volunteer
- Clients from past jobs if you worked extensively with them (and it wouldn't violate any contracts, NDA or non-compete agreements, or serve as a conflict of interest)
- Advisors to student groups if you are a student
- Friends for personal references
- Coaches

How do I choose among the possibilities?

- Will this person say something good about you as a person and the quality of your work? If you're not sure, then consider others to ask. Were there others on the leadership team who could vouch for you?
- Has this person had the opportunity to get to know you and your work style?
 - For coworkers, have you worked together on big projects?
 - For professors, have you attended office hours and participated in class?
 - For supervisors, have you received positive performance reviews?
- If you are conducting a confidential search, can you trust that this person will not reveal to your current boss that you are looking?
- How long has it been since you worked with this person?
- Are these references recent?
- Are these references relevant - can they speak to the key skills needed for the job you are seeking?
- If the reference is someone from a while back, did you work with that person for a substantial amount of time and have they been updated on how you have grown as a professional?

When are references needed (Timing)?

- At the beginning of a job search – some companies request references on the initial application
- References are often requested during final interviews when you could be getting close to an offer
- When you are going for a promotion at your current company
- When applying to graduate school
- When under consideration for Board Membership
- When applying to volunteer for philanthropic organizations, especially if background checks are needed for working with children or other vulnerable populations

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DO's and Don'ts

DO:

- **Be respectful when asking.** Consider the relationship you have with this person when asking. Was it more formal or informal? Keep the tone of your emails aligned with your past interactions.
- Provide enough information at the right time so the reference can most effectively help you. This means asking this person at the beginning of your job search if they would be willing to be a reference. Sharing the types of jobs you are applying for and letting them know where you currently are in the process. If they are open to it, send them your resume so they can see what you have achieved since you worked together.
- Let your references know as soon as you finish a good interview that they might be called so they will not be taken off guard by a call. Give them the job description of the target job and the specific skills or past projects and achievements you hope to highlight to your new potential employer. Keep them updated on progress without sending too many emails. Find that balance where they are informed, but do not feel like you are emailing them everyday with minute details. In the past, I have tended to send my contacts between 3-6 emails during a 6-month job search (the initial ask; a follow up thank you with the resume and more details when they say yes; an email or two around the time of the interview when the new company mentions they will be contacting references; and a timely thank you note).
- Send a thank you note expressing your sincere appreciation for their help – regardless of the outcome.
- Vary your references so your potential employer can learn about your work ethic from a variety of people and perspectives. It's fine if most of your references come from the same company if you worked there for years, but brainstorm about other people who could vouch for you as well.
- If you are sending a hardcopy letter via mail, include your address at the top of the page, the date, and then the name, title, company, and address of the person you are asking. For example:

Joe B. Seeker
123 Main Street
Anytown, TN 37203

June 11, 2018

Ms. Sally Jones
Executive Director
ABC Corporation
2020 Success Drive
Mountain View, CA 94039

Dear Ms. Jones:

DON'T:

- Don't assume the person will say yes. Perhaps they want to, but are swamped at work.
- Don't ask current clients of your company for references if you are conducting a confidential search. You don't want to jeopardize your current job while you are looking and it would not be right to put your client in that situation. Even if the search is out in the open, get permission before asking a client.
- Don't turn your procrastination into someone else's emergency. They might be in the middle of a move, vacation or some other life event of their own that prevents them from being readily available. For letters of recommendation, you have the give the person ample time to write a letter than can help you. Aim for at least a month or more if possible.

Formatting of references attached to resume

- Aim for at least 3, preferably more references to include. Be sure to have at least 2 direct supervisors or faculty advisors if possible. Supervisors at summer jobs and internships count, as well at places where you volunteered.
- For experienced job seekers, you could include contacts from Board Memberships and professional organizations with whom you have worked closely.
- Make sure that you have updated contact info and have requested permission from each person and given him or her notice when they should expect to be contacted.
- Attach references as a separate sheet accompanying your resume. The references should not be on your resume.

Your Name

street and city, state, zip code | phone | email | [LinkedIn url customized](#)

REFERENCES

Full name

Title

Company Name

Address

Phone

Email

- *Direct Supervisor, 2017 – Present*

Full name

Title

University Name

Address

Phone

Email

- *Faculty Advisor, 2013 – 2017*

Full name

Title

Company Name

Address

Phone

Email

- *Peer at University Name, Co-led Graduate Student Orientation for Student Leadership Board, 2018*

Full name

Title

Company Name

Address

Phone

Email

- *Direct Supervisor at internship, Summer 2015 and 2016*

Full name

Title

School Name

Address

Email

- *Coach for 4 years of Tennis (3 years Varsity), 2014 - 2018*

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Email samples for various types of outreach

Sample 1 – Asking a former boss when you've been out of touch for a while

Hi Donna! I hope you have been doing well. It's hard to believe it has 3 years since we worked together. I learned so much while we were working on the XYZ project and have fond memories working at _____ company name.

Things have been good here. I have enjoyed working at ABC company for the past 2 years and getting to explore the city of Denver. After much contemplation, I've decided it's time for new challenges, so I'm beginning to search for Marketing Director roles and hope to relocate to San Diego later this year.

Would you be available to serve as a reference and provide a positive recommendation for me? If yes, I will be happy to send you my resume and a sample job description so you will have an updated view of my experience and what I'm seeking.

Thank you for considering this. I look forward to connecting with you again and hearing your updates.

*Sincerely,
Your Name Here*

Sample 2 – Asking a former boss when you have been in touch, but haven't seen them in person recently

Hi Fran! It was great seeing you at the XYZ conference last summer. I'm so happy we had a chance to reconnect and to hear about your new projects. How has everything been going for you?

Things have been going well at ABC company. It's been 3 years and I'm ready to take on challenges. As much as I've enjoyed working in academic administration, I'm exploring a possible career change and have started exploring possibilities on the recruiting side. After years of working with recruiters and advising students, I'm excited to learn about that side of the business.

I started my search last week and have noticed many of the applications are asking for a list of references up front. Would you be willing to serve as a reference for me? If you're comfortable with that, I will keep you updated as the search progresses and let you know when it looks like an employer might call you. Thank you for considering this.

Please send my best to your family. I hope to see you at the XYZ conference in Niagara Falls this year.

*Best,
Your name here*

Sample 3 – Asking a Former Co-worker

Hi Dan! How have you been? It's hard to believe it's been 2 years since we worked on the XYZ project. I hope things have been going well in your world. How are Megan and the twins?

While I have really enjoyed living in Nashville, I realize it's time for a change and I hope to make a move back to Philly by the end of this year. For now, I'm looking at Marketing Director roles in non-profits. After we worked on

that project with Help Others Foundations, I realized I would like to explore roles within a philanthropic organization.

May I list your name as a reference on the applications? Since we worked together on so many client and teams, I thought you could speak to my ability to collaborate and strategize on projects. Thank you for considering this.

I hope we can catch up soon!

*Warm regards,
Your name here*

Sample 4 – Asking a professor for a reference for graduate school

Dear Professor Clayton,

Thank you for guidance last semester during office hours for your Social Psychology class. I appreciated the time you spent that helped me better prepare for class discussions. In fact, after taking that class, I have decided to apply to master's programs in the field that focus on social judgment and decision making.

As I explore the top programs around the country, I see that the graduate school applications require sealed letters of recommendation. Since I have taken two of your classes, do you feel you know me well enough to provide me with a positive letter? The application is due in two months by November 1st. I have attached my resume that outlines my research experience in the Positive Psychology lab for two summers, along with my internship at ABC Marketing and on-campus job at the Student Life Center. I also included details about the programs I'm applying to this fall.

Thank you for considering this given your busy schedule. If your answer is yes, I will be happy to provide you with any additional information you need.

*Sincerely,
Your Name Here*

Sample 5 – Asking a manager at a volunteer organization

Hi Mr. Scott,

I truly enjoyed working with Help Kids last summer as an events coordinator. Collaborating with the team to plan the Signature Gala was a highlight of my summer. Not only did I gain event planning experience and learn how to create a WordPress site, but I also realized I would like to pursue opportunities in the non-profit space. This summer I will be in Los Angeles, California and am looking at organizations similar to Help Kids out there.

Would you be willing to provide a positive reference for my internship applications? I will keep you updated regarding the specific organizations and if it looks like I'm getting close to the reference check part of the process. Thank you for considering this!

If you have any other suggestions of places I should apply or any advice, I would greatly appreciate your guidance.

*Sincerely,
Your Name Here*

Sample 6 – Email to an old boss when you’re not looking for a reference, but want touch base after a while

Hi Susan! How have you been? It’s hard to believe it has been 5 years since we worked together. I saw an article on (something related to what you used to do) and thought of you. Hope your family is doing well.

I moved up to Pennsylvania last year and have been working as a recruiter. It’s been great being back here, of course I do miss the warm Florida weather. I’d love to schedule a call when you’re free to catch up properly. Have a great weekend!

*Warm regards,
Your Name Here*

Sample 7 – Thank you Note

Hi Donna! Thank you for serving as a reference for me. I’m so grateful and truly appreciate your help with my job search. The hiring manager said that I’m one of the final 2 candidates and I should hear by the end of the week once the HR Director returns from a conference and finalizes details of the offer letter. I promise to keep you posted on the status. Please let me know if I can ever help you in any way. Thanks again!

*Sincerely,
Your Name Here*

Tips to Keep in Mind

- You will notice that most of the messages above take a line or two before jumping in and asking. That’s my preference and has served me well throughout my career. People have different views on this, and it depends on the type of person you’re asking. If you are asking a person who is all about getting to the point, then adjust your message accordingly, but include some type of greeting.
- Keep the tone of your email similar to the types of conversations you had with that person when you worked together.
- Cultivate references when you are not doing a job search. This simply means keeping in touch with people when you don’t need them and look for opportunities to help others when you can.
- If possible, see if you can connect with your potential reference in person before asking. Perhaps you could schedule a time to catch up over coffee. Listening to things in their life goes a long way and it’s fun.
- Prepare a 30-second version of where you are now in your career, so you can summarize what’s happening and provide them ideas of what you are looking for in your job search.
- Help people help you! When you’re ambiguous about what you want, it’s hard for people to know how to help you. It’s fine for you to be in exploration mode and not have things figured out, but have an idea of where they fit into your exploration or job search (in this case as a positive reference).

How do references tie into networking and the big picture of your job search?

Just like athletes train throughout the off-season, it’s helpful when you’re a job seeker if you have nurtured your existing relationships along the way. That way, you are there to help people as they need it and they will be there for you as well. For example, I spent 7 years at Vanderbilt’s Career Center and when I left, I sent goodbye emails to many of my contacts and friends to update them on my big move to Philly and say how much I enjoyed working with them. A year

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later when I decided I missed academia and wanted to go back to career advising on the college level, it was much easier to send an email to touch base and ask for a reference. In some cases, my contacts would not only serve as a reference, but also had leads that helped me in my search. Keep those contacts warm by reaching out to people around the holidays or the new year to see how they are and keep up with events in their world. It's fun to keep those relationships going and you never know how you can help one another. I still keep up with a few people from my first professional job years ago and enjoy seeing their updates.

For more Job Search tips learn more at www.tjfcareercoach.com.

Need help with references, resumes, cover letters, LinkedIn profile updates, mock interviews, career exploration, or career coaching? Email Tiffany@tjfcareercoach.com to request a quote and book your service today.