

Giving References

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HR Guidance

Giving References



Giving References

Scope

This guidance concerns the provision of employment references for existing and past College employees. It is not appropriate to the review of academic work or to student references.

Agreement

Current and former employees often request references for potential new employers. There is no legal duty to comply unless the subject intends to work in finance, but it is considered good practice. Refusal can put employees in awkward positions, and reference writing is a good opportunity to show appreciation of the contribution of others.

Appropriate Content

References must contain only factual details and opinion firmly believed to be correct. Be objective, truthful, and balanced. Unfavourable statements should be included only if the issue has, at some stage, been put to the subject.

Include some or all of the following:

- ❖ Job title and employment dates
- ❖ Responsibilities and performance assessment
- ❖ Any prior posts at Queen Mary
- ❖ Attendance, with details
- ❖ Recent disciplinary warnings, with dates
- ❖ Reason for departure: resignation or termination. Specify: fixed term contract, dismissal, redundancy, retirement.

Data Protection

You do not have to show a subject their reference, but they will be able to view the copy held by their new employer. Always assume that the subject will see their reference.

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Corporate and Personal References

There are clear distinctions between corporate references given on behalf of Queen Mary, and personal references where you act as referee because of a personal relationship.

- ❖ Only give references for the College when authorised to do so by your seniority to the subject or the permission of a senior manager. Use Queen Mary headed paper for corporate references.
- ❖ You may give references in a personal capacity, but you should state that this is the case. Never use College stationery for personal references or misrepresent the authority on which it is given.

Difficult References

References can be difficult to write for many reasons. If the problem is alleged or actual misconduct by or towards the subject, lay out the situation objectively. Give evidence of events, e.g. absence details or disciplinary sessions and, if appropriate, the authorities involved.

Responsibilities

Referees have responsibilities to their subjects and to future employers. References cannot contain unfounded opinion or any facts or actions taken unknown to the subject. If false or misleading information is included, the subject may take action based on the reference unfairly affecting their future employment prospects.

- ❖ References need not be comprehensive.
- ❖ Selective reporting, good or bad, is misleading.
- ❖ Future employers may seek compensation for financial losses caused by misleading references.
- ❖ You are not culpable for telling the objective truth.

Where there are difficulties in satisfying the duties to both parties, ensure that you believe your statements to be true and to have reasonable grounds of evidence and belief. Such situations would include employees leaving during unresolved disciplinary procedures.

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Disclaimers

You may include a disclaimer, but do be aware that it may be overridden. The College's Human Resources Managers can provide further advice.

Suspicious

Suspicious of past inappropriate behaviour must not be included, even if you are asked specifically on the issue, unless official action was taken (see also below).

Issues not acted upon are legally considered irrelevant and potentially discriminatory. This also applies to informal warnings refuted by employees and not taken further.

Children and Vulnerable Adults

Where subjects seek to work with children or vulnerable adults and you have any suspicion of behaviour making them inappropriate to work with these groups, please contact a senior member of HR for advice. Your duty to share concerns may outweigh any risk of litigation against the College.

Including Confidential Information

The best way to address issues of confidentiality and suspicion is to consult the subject. If they request unreasonable changes remember that this is not a negotiation; you are generally entitled to refuse to give a reference.

Discrimination, Victimisation and Harassment

Current and former employees can bring charges of unfair discrimination, victimisation or harassment connected to the working relationship based upon references within reasonable time periods.

In cases of actual or alleged grievance it is advisable to agree to give references if asked; refusal may be considered a further act against the subject. For further guidance refer to the Dignity at Work Policy.

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Good Practice

- ❖ Send references by post, not email.
- ❖ Telephone references leave you no record.
- ❖ Mark references 'confidential' and 'addressee only'.
- ❖ Never promise a 'good' or 'supportive' reference.
- ❖ Avoid potentially ambiguous statements.
- ❖ Do not give unsolicited references.
- ❖ For further advice on references contact Human Resources.



Model Reference

You will have your own individual writing style, but this generic reference may be a useful starting point.

Private and Confidential

Dear [employer's name],

Reference for [subject's name], [post applied for]

[Subject] was employed as [job title] in the [department] at Queen Mary, University of London between [dates].

The main responsibilities of [subject]'s role comprised [duties]. [Subject] carried out [his/her] duties conscientiously and effectively. I know of nothing to make me question [subject]'s honesty or integrity.

[Subject] had excellent attendance during [his/her] time at Queen Mary, with only [number] days of sickness absence in the past [number] years. [Subject] left Queen Mary of [his/her] own accord to [reason].

[Further comments and answers to specific questions]

I believe that [subject] would be well suited to the position of [new job title], and would have no hesitation in recommending them for this post.

Yours sincerely

[Your name and job title]