Recommendation and Reference Letters

Recommendation and reference letters are used synonymously. However, the two letters are different in both audience and purpose. Recommendation letters are either written to a known recipient that has contacted you or to a recipient that you have been given the contact name and information. A reference letter is typically written as a to whom it may concern audience.

Whether you are writing a recommendation letter or a reference letter, there are some ethical points to consider:

- You only write a letter if you have first-hand knowledge of a person’s skills or performance. (That doesn’t mean you cannot write a letter of recommendation for someone who works in your company but not directly with you. But, you should pull his or her file; you should ask his or her supervisor; you should do some research.)
- You must always be truthful. (In your professional and personal life, you are only as good as your word. Embellishing or lying in a recommendation or reference letter can harm you and your company’s reputation. Take this part of your job seriously.)
- If you cannot give a good recommendation for a person, tell him or her.

When you are asked to write either a recommendation or a reference letter, you should—respond promptly, research the applicant, and write well. In addition, you should ask the person who is requesting the letter (the applicant) to give you his or her resume as a guide for writing the letter. Write the letter in the business format and either mail it or send it through your email as an attachment. The length is dependent upon you; however, you must consider that people are busy and may read hundreds of letters a day, so write well, don’t waste words, and try to keep to the business of recommending. Make sure you include a subject line. Subject Line: Letter of recommendation for John Doe

Components:

Introductory Paragraph: You are providing your credibility and your relationship with the applicant. This is an important paragraph.

1. Include your name and position (this gives you credibility to the receiver.)
2. The applicant’s full name—this is important.
3. Length of time that you have known the applicant and under what circumstance you know him or her.

Body Paragraph One: The letter changes from you and your relationship with the applicant to all about the applicant.

1. The applicant’s professional qualifications—years of experience, credentials, awards.
2. Provide specific examples of the applicant’s accomplishments and achievements.
3. What sets the applicant apart from others who may be applying—follow with examples?

Body Paragraph Two: You will use this paragraph to address skills and traits that will be specific to the position the applicant is applying. (Typically, you will know you have been listed as a person to contact, and you should ask the applicant to email you his or her resume, so you will know exactly what skills out of their skill set that you will mention.)

1. Do not mention characteristics that could be the basis of discrimination such as race, religion, color, nationality, age, appearance, marital status, disabilities, etc.
2. Skills that you should mention are the ability to communicate (verbal and written), intelligence, self-reliance, initiative, flexibility, willingness to accept responsibility, energy level, direction,
interpersonal skills, ability to effectively handle conflict, teamwork, level of commitment, ability to lead, etc.

3. Gear the traits and skills to those that will speak to the position. Do not embellish or lie.

Note: Avoid phrases such as good, adequate, fair, reasonable, dependable, loyal, satisfactory etc. Use words such as exceptional, significant, astute, articulate, versatile, creative, assertive, imaginative, qualified, dedicated, professional, dynamic, and innovative.

Conclusion: This is where you end the letter with one last bid for the applicant.

1. You might mention the applicant in a positive light one more time.
2. Restate your contact information for further assistance or information.
3. End in good will.

Typical types of recommendation letters: The two most common types of recommendation letters are for a job or as part of a college or university admissions packet.

1. Employment Related is a recommendation letter that is requested by a company about an applicant. The applicant has given your name as a person who can recommend him or her for a particular job. These types of letters are positive and should be written by someone who has intimate or first-hand knowledge of the applicant’s ability. Typically you will have been in some supervisory position of the applicant so that you would have the credibility to give the recommendation and would have the objectivity to write a letter about a person’s performance. When you write the letter, you will send the letter back to the requesting person—using attention John Smith and Subject—Recommendation Letter for Jane Doe. Dear Mr. Smith:

2. College/university acceptance is another important letter of recommendation. When a person is applying for undergraduate or graduate programs, they are asked to provide two or three letters of recommendation. People who typically write this type of letter are former teachers, community leaders, faculty members, administrators, academic supervisors, or an employer.

Typical types of reference letters: Reference letters are general and are typically addressed to “whom it may concern.” They provide basic job information: attendance, dates of employment, credentials, positions held and ability to work well with others.

1. Job Applicant: A reference letter for a job contains a positive statement that sums up the person in a positive light. Typically, the applicant will submit these with his or her application letter.

2. Character References: Character references are written when a person may apply for child care or domestic work. This type of letter will reflect virtuous characteristics like honesty and trustworthiness as well as a person’s dependability.

Intercompany Recommendations: You may be called upon to write a letter that recommends a person for an award, a raise, or outstanding service.

1. Commendation Letters are often written by a fellow employee or by an immediate supervisor for the purpose of noting an employee’s exemplary performance that went beyond what is expected. These letters are often interoffice and are meant to use for nominating a person for an award or recognition of outstanding service. This type of letter may also be used to recommend someone in a community for an award.
2. Performance evaluation letters are used to provide favorable critique of an employee. They may be written by the employee’s supervisors for the purpose of providing management with favorable or not so favorable critique of an employee’s work performance. They become a permanent part of the employee’s record and are used to determine raises, promotions, etc.