Reference/Recommendation Letters

Letters of Recommendation
Reference letters or letters of recommendation are written by former employers or professors (teachers) on behalf of the candidate. Candidates typically need about 3 to 5 names of former employers or professors (teachers) to serve as reference sources. The references submitted to the employer can be a list of the names and contact information of each individual or they can be actual letters (or both).

Types of References
There are two types of reference sources: Professional (from former employers) and Academic (from professors and teachers). Typically, references should come from someone who has been in a position to have observed the quality of your work and is willing to make positive comments on your behalf. Personal or Character references are generally not needed.

Format
The format of a reference letter is no different than the layout of any other type of formal business letter. The writer of a reference letter does have a lot of leeway as to the format. It should be dated. It should be signed. It should contain the address/contact information of the writer. It need not be addressed to a particular employer. The salutation may read, “Dear Prospective Employer.”

Content
A reference letter is written from the perspective of a person who has observed the professional or academic performance of the candidate. The writer should mention the capacity in which he or she knows the candidate. The writer should then comment on the quality of the candidate’s work, making specific reference to the skills utilized by the candidate. The writer may comment on particular projects or functions in which the candidate excelled.

Language
The beginning of a typical reference letter may state, “I am pleased to offer my recommendation of behalf of John Smith. He is an outstanding student, a capable engineer (or appropriate function), and an excellent candidate for your organization.” The letter can then go on to say, “John worked as an intern in my organization for one year, and in that time he displayed strong analytical and technical abilities and excellent administrative and organizational skills.”

Reference Lists
When compiling a list of references, candidates should remember that this list is a separate form or individual document apart from the resume. References should not be listed on the resume.

Guidelines
- When creating this list, include the name and title of the person, the name of his or her company/organization, mailing address, telephone number, and e-mail address. It is recommended that the reference list reflect the same look of the resume and cover letter (same font, same paper).
- Diversify your reference portfolio. There should be several different life areas from which you can solicit references:
  - Academic
  - Employment
  - Professional Society/Leadership
- Ask for permission to use someone as a reference and provide them with a copy of your resume and/or the job description. This helps them serve as a more effective reference.
- Ask your references for their preferred manner of contact and make sure this is noted on your reference sheet.
- Consider sending occasional reminders to your references throughout your job search.