

References: From Whom to Get Them and What to Provide, and How to Write a Personal Statement for Graduate School, References, or a Job

From Whom to Get References. Ask professors who know you well and can provide positive information about you. Employers also are good references.

What to Provide Your References. Provide some relevant information for your references with the application information. Specifically, indicate:

1. Your name and student identification number
2. How the reference knows you (which classes you have taken from the reference, whether you stopped by to discuss topics, etc.)
3. The employers or universities to which you have applied, the due date for each, and whether there is a specific form an employer or university wants to have filled out. Make sure to attach a copy of the form to be filled out by the reference.
4. Whether there is a form to be attached to a reference letter which indicates whether or not you reserve the right to see the reference letter. If there is such a form, sign away your right to see the reference letter, because people assume that an open letter may not be completely honest. They are more likely to believe a private communication. Further, if you really do not trust your reference, don't ask him or her. Ask someone else.
5. Indicate what should happen with the letter of reference. If it is to be included in a complete package you send in, and each reference is to sign across the crease of the envelope of the reference letter, say so, and arrange with each reference how you will obtain the letter. If the letter is to be sent in by the reference, provide an addressed and stamped envelope.
6. Provide contextual information which will help your reference write a better letter. - *Scores and Grade Point Averages.* If you know your GRE scores, provide them. If you did not live up to your academic ability when you first came to college, because you were away from home for the first time and less motivated, indicate this, and report your grade point average in psychology and overall both with and without this troublesome initial period. If you did not do well during a particular term, indicate which term(s) you did not live up to your academic ability, and indicate why in general terms. It is sufficient to say that you had health problems; no need to give further details. Similarly, if you were in a relationship for the first time and it ended during this term, saying so is enough. Further details are not needed. Do report your grade point average in psychology and overall both with and without this difficult period. *Awards or Acknowledgments.* If you have received an award, let your references know. *Jobs.* Think about what your jobs taught you about people. For example, if you arranged birthday parties for McDonald's, then you learned a lot about children and their parents. *Include the information also included in your Personal Statement, see below.*

Personal Statement.

Applications usually ask for a personal statement. It is a statement about your professional aspirations and experiences relevant to it. Provide detailed information about your previous research experiences, current interests, other experiences relevant to your future career, and what your future career goals are. Show you are a good professional by writing clearly and by using correct spelling and good grammar. Take time to revise it, and don't hesitate to ask a faculty member or the Writing Center in Pray-Harrod to proofread it.

Previous Research Experiences. Indicate specifically what the research was about, and what you did. Show that you understood all aspects of it and not just your specific duties. Indicate which specific skills you learned, such as literature review, data entry. Indicate what the outcome of the project was. Did it lead to a class presentation or a publication? If a publication, enclose a copy. Indicate how you feel about the research, and what impact it had on your career decisions.

Current Interests. Indicate what current interests you have, and how these interests fit with the program to which you are applying. You should explore the interests of the faculty in the program to which you are applying. Get to know their work. Feel free to ask for reprints of their publications. Then write your personal statement to show why you are a good fit for the program and for working and studying with one or more of the faculty in the program.

Other experiences. Indicate any work, volunteer, or other experiences which are relevant to the program to which you are applying. Indicate how they are relevant and how they influenced your career decisions.

Summary. Indicate what you want to do after you graduate from the program. Indicate that you understand your options and why you are choosing this specific option.

The clearer you can be about your previous experiences, current interests, career goals, and fit with the program to which you are applying, the better your personal statement. Your references and admission committee members for the program to which you are applying will be evaluating the goodness of fit between you and the program to which you are applying. Your references may ask questions if they perceive a mismatch, but the admission committee will reject you. So get to know yourself, and don't hesitate to ask for guidance from faculty.

For further information on writing a personal statement, see Bennett, Kymberley (1999) *The student notebook. Applying to graduate school: writing a compelling personal statement.* American Psychological Society Observer, 12, pp. 24, 26. It was reprinted from (1999) *Psi Chi's Eye on Psi Chi*, 4(1), 20-22.

Follow Through. Please let your references know what happened to you and stay in touch. They care, and by staying in touch you and your references are included in professional networks which exchange information and ideas.