REFERENCE WRITING GUIDE

Your essential tool for a great application.
WHAT IS A UCAS REFERENCE?

UCAS references are designed to provide universities with an informed and academic assessment of an applicant’s suitability for further study. This is the only section of the application not completed by the applicants themselves which makes it valuable for Admissions Advisers, along with the predicted grades.

- When an individual is nominated as a referee they’ll either receive an email from UCAS or, if they work in the school/college the applicant is studying at, the reference application will be available in Adviser Track.
- A reference may be up to 4,000 characters or 47 lines of text.
- The page will time out after 35 minutes of inactivity so it is important to click save regularly.
- Referees may save a copy of each reference they write for their own records.

Top Tip:
Write your reference in Microsoft Word. When you are happy with your reference, you can copy and paste the text to the online application – just watch out for the character limit!

Remember, Admissions Advisers require the referees contact information so it’s important they include the following details:

- Relationship to the student
- Email address (using institution/college/school email where possible)
- Phone number
- Institution/college/school name and full address
WHAT SHOULD I INCLUDE IN A UCAS REFERENCE?

1 Information about the institution/college/school
   - Size and type of school/college
   - Number of students in the applicants year group, and the proportion typically progressing to Higher Education (HE)
   - Typical number and patterns of qualifications taken by students
   - Information about school policy, such as certification of AS-levels
   - Contextual information about the catchment

2 Qualification information for the student
   - What type of qualification is the student studying?
   - Details about the structure, content and marking scheme are helpful if the student is studying a non-standard qualification.

3 Performance in class
   - The student's academic performance in their post-16 education
   - Performance in individual subjects

4 Specific or outstanding achievements/strengths/concerns
   - Any personal qualities which will benefit them at university, such as skills, aptitude and enthusiasm.

5 Would you recommend them for university study?
   - Their potential for academic success in HE
   - Why the course they have chosen is suited to them – keeping in mind they might apply for a number of different courses
   - Detail why you think he/she is suited for HE

6 Predicted grades
   Predicted grades can be hard to estimate but it's helpful to mention if they are on target to achieve them, including information on their motivation and work ethic. This can be particularly helpful if their predicted grades are demonstrating a shift in academic ability from AS-levels or GCSE performance.

7 Work experience
   Voluntary work or work experience that the student has undertaken. Including feedback from the provider of the work experience is helpful.

8 Additional information
   Extenuating circumstances
   If the student's academic performance may have suffered due to personal or external circumstances, such as an ongoing illness, domestic upheaval, or the illness or death of a close relative. It is usual for this to be disclosed in the reference, rather than the personal statement. It is important for Admissions Advisers to be aware of anything which has hindered a student's performance at school. It is also important for a university to know if the student's personal circumstances may affect their academic performance in higher education.

   Make sure you have been given consent from your student before disclosing any information about their health or a disability.

   If the reference mentions external problems, such as the student being disadvantaged through continuous staff changes or the school being in special measures, it is important that the college/school addresses this in all references, to avoid any suggestion of inconsistency or bias towards a particular student.

   Students with disabilities, long-term medical conditions, or specific learning difficulties
   Students are invited to disclose any disabilities, long-term medical conditions or specific learning difficulties in a separate part of the UCAS application. Some students may be reluctant to do so in case this disadvantages their application; please reassure these students that they will be considered on their academic merits and the level of entry that is required for their chosen course. We encourage students to tell a university about a disability, long-term medical condition or specific learning difficulty (especially where they have had academic support in place at school/college) as they may be eligible for additional support, personal and/or financial. This support may be delayed if the student waits to disclose their disability until they have started their course. Most university disability services will offer to keep any detailed information the student provides confidential whilst offering the student initial advice and guidance.

   You should not give information about a student's health or a disability without their consent.
I was not aware of this applicant's career plans until I read about them in their personal statement. I am not convinced that they have made the best career choice. In this case, it is best to focus on the student's performance within their individual subjects and their suitability for university in general, rather than commenting on their career plans.

English is a second or third language for many of my students. Does this need to be addressed in the reference? It is useful to know if a student's first language is not English and how well they are performing at school based on this. Admissions Advisers may ask for a separate English language test but this will be assessed based on their qualifications and academic history.

Should I submit additional material or references, other than that provided through the UCAS process? Generally, the reference should include all the information that you believe is required to assist the Admissions Adviser in assessing your student's applications. However, if you need to contact the university after an application has been submitted, this isn't usually a problem. Bear in mind that a decision could have already been made.

**REFERENCE EXAMPLES**

Over the next few pages there are a few examples to give you an idea of what our Admissions Advisers are looking for in your reference.

- A-level humanities example page 8
- BTEC qualification example page 9
- EU reference example page 10
- Mature student example page 11
Peter is a highly-motivated student with a keen interest in pursuing a career in law. He was originally studying AS-levels English Literature, Religious Philosophy and Ethics, Psychology, and Law; although Peter worked hard to understand individual units and components for Psychology, he decided he'd benefit in his final year by studying three A-levels and the EPQ in Law, and therefore took the decision upon himself to discontinue Psychology after AS-level. Peter has approached his studies in a mature and organised manner and consistently submits work of a high standard.

In English Literature, Religious Philosophy and Ethics, and Law, Peter pays attention to detail and has excellent analysis skills. He thoroughly describes and evaluates his arguments, using evidence to effectively support his claims. Peter enthusiastically engages with classroom debates in Law and applies relevant principles in a sophisticated manner, referencing cases appropriately. His research and understanding of the subject is outstanding and highlights his dedication to his studies. As a result, he is predicted to achieve a grade A in Law at A-level.

Peter would be well-suited to study Law at university and he comes highly recommended to you without reservations in his capabilities to study the subject at degree level. His commitment, prioritisation skills and enthusiasm for his work are qualities that we believe will make him a great addition to your School of Law.

Jordan has participated in various extra-curricular activities for our college; his role as a student ambassador has given him confidence outside of the classroom and exercised his leadership skills during our open days, and higher education and careers events. Jordan has also taken a lead role in our coaching programme, working with a range of age groups in both local primary and lower secondary schools; he has participated in coaching classes, sports day activities and after-school activity sessions. Jordan is very comfortable working with others and has shown to be a compassionate individual; his commitment and enthusiasm for coaching and mentoring individuals has proven him a valuable member of the Physical Education department in representing our sixth form.

Jordan has demonstrated a wide range of academic and non-academic skills at [X College], in particular, he is confident at working independently and to a high standard, while maintaining key organisational skills in a busy environment. Jordan has shown that he possesses the skills and qualities needed to excel at university and we highly recommend him for a place at your institution without any reservations.
[X College] has a total of 360 students and offers various Access to Higher Education courses in the humanities and social sciences. As part of the course, students examine a range of topics in English literature, psychology, sociology, and criminology. Students are required to achieve 60 credits to obtain the Access to HE Diploma, consisting of 15 ungraded credits and 45 credits at pass, merit or distinction level. In addition to these core academic units, students are also required to successfully complete a 4,000-word dissertation project.

Jessica enrolled on to the Access to HE Diploma in Social Sciences in September 2010 with the aspiration and motivation to progress on to a career in clinical psychology. She’s been a strong student from the beginning of her course; her determination and dedication to her academic and voluntary work is admirable. Jessica has excelled in her individual subjects and continues to drive for a higher goal – her latest examination on media, culture and society is a testimony to this as she received a Distinction*. Her ability to understand, organise and interpret key ideas is well-rounded, and her arguments, both written and verbal, are consistently communicated in a succinct and sophisticated manner.
LOOKING FOR MORE INFORMATION AND ADVICE?

UCAS offer helpful toolkits and guides. Head to their website for more details.  
www.ucas.com/advisers

Don’t hesitate to contact our friendly Admissions Team.  
T +44 (0) 1206 873666  
E admit@essex.ac.uk  
www.essex.ac.uk/cer/ug-admissions

Other resources and helpful guides can be found on our website.  
www.essex.ac.uk/outreach

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