



University of Essex

REFERENCE WRITING GUIDE



Your essential tool for the perfect application.

WHAT IS A UCAS REFERENCE?



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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.

- You'll either receive an email from UCAS or, if you work in the college/school the applicant is studying at, the reference application will be available in Adviser Track.
- You can use up to 4,000 characters or 47 lines of text.
- Remember to click 'save' regularly as the page will time out after 35 minutes of inactivity.
- You may want to save a copy of each reference you write for your own records.

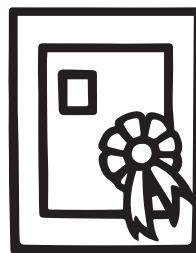
Top Tip:

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 your contact information so it's important you 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 your institution/college/school

Below are some examples of information about the referring institution/college/school which should come at the beginning of the reference:

- Size and type of school/college
- Number of students in their 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 he/she studying?
- Details about the structure, content and marking scheme are helpful if your student is studying an 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
- Please 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.

If you believe that your student has potential to achieve higher than you have predicted, but under extenuating circumstances, this won't be possible for the forthcoming exams, then this is also useful to know.

WHAT SHOULD I WRITE IN A UCAS REFERENCE?

continued



7 Additional information

Extenuating circumstances

Your 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 admission tutors 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 your reference mentions external problems, such as your student being disadvantaged through continuous staff changes or your school being in special measures, it is important that your 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, either personal 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.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



Is there a preferred layout for the reference?

There are no official rules but many references are structured in separate paragraphs, one for each of the student's main subjects. There is usually an opening paragraph providing contextual information about your institution/college/school and background information about your student, and a concluding paragraph summarising your student's potential.

Where do I include the predicted grades?

You can input the predicted grades at the top of the reference form on UCAS Apply.

Who should the reference be written by?

The reference should be written by someone who teaches the student, or is in contact with those that teach the student (ie a tutor), and can comment knowledgeably on their academic performance.

Your reference should be submitted by a member of staff who has specific responsibility for, and engagement with, the higher education admissions process. This may be a senior member of your school or college management team, but there is no requirement for the reference to be 'signed off' by the head of your institution. In many ways, the more remote the person completing the reference from the applicant, the less value this holds for the university.

Should I refer to my student's performance in specific modules?

Yes, if your student has not already written about it in their personal statement and you feel that they may benefit from you doing so. For example, if your student narrowly missed a higher grade in a specific module at AS-level then you may wish to mention this.

Should I include a reference for an AS-level subject that the student is not taking onto A-level?

This is not essential but many references do include comments on a finished AS-level. It can be especially important if the AS-level subject has some relevance to the course that your student wishes to study at university.

How much detail should I give about my student's personality?

If highlighting your student's personal qualities will strengthen their application then it is relevant, particularly if these qualities are beneficial to their academic capabilities or their career choice.

This applicant left our school two years ago and I don't know what they've been doing since. What should I write for their reference?

It is best to write about their performance and potential when you knew them. If your student has mentioned what they've been doing in their personal statement, you may wish to comment on this.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

continued



I was not aware of this applicant's career plans until I read about them in his personal statement. I am not convinced that he has made the best career choice.

In this case, it is best to focus on your student's performance within his individual subjects and his suitability for university in general, rather than commenting on his 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?

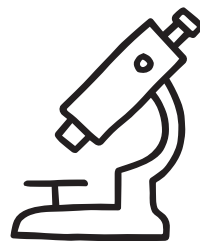
Generally, your reference should include all the information that you believe is required to assist the admissions adviser in assessing your student's applications. However, if you need to contact the university after an application has been submitted, this isn't usually a problem. Bear in mind that 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 science example	page 7
A-Level humanities example	page 8
BTEC qualification example	page 9
EU reference example	page 10
Mature student example	page 11

A-LEVEL SCIENCE EXAMPLE



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[X School] is a comprehensive school with 2,200 students in years 7-13, including a total of 190 students studying in year 13, 96% of which are expected to progress to higher education. The sixth form offers a range of AS- and A-level subjects to study across faculties of humanities, sciences, and social sciences.

Emma has studied at [X School] since September 2010 and progressed to our sixth form in September 2015, now studying A-levels Chemistry, Biology and Mathematics. Emma is a naturally inquisitive student, committed to achieving high-standards and goals; she is an engaging, confident individual who excels at managing her time and workload effectively.

Emma is very self-motivated in each of her A-levels and works to the best of her abilities. In Biology, she has recently completed independent research on genetic engineering and modifying stem cells; Emma has researched and understood a breadth of primary and secondary sources for her assignment and produced a sophisticated, concise piece of work on restructuring cells. During practical work in Chemistry, Emma has made great progress in developing her knowledge and skills working with a range of equipment; she initially struggled with some of the more challenging materials on the course but persevered to successfully master these and gain better insight into the way chemistry works.

Emma has particularly enjoyed using a range of mathematical tools to uncover patterns and trends in data sets, and extending this research to identify the mathematical rhythm in nature: the genetic patterns in the evolution of animals. Emma is capable of studying independently and managing her work appropriately; she has adopted a methodical approach in each of her subjects to collect and analyse data which has cultivated her key organisational and communication skills.

Emma has a lot of passion for the sciences, particularly Biology, and has dedicated a lot of time and effort to her studies at [X School]. Her impeccable attention to detail, self-discipline and inspirational attitude to her work are qualities that will well equip Emma for a degree at your university; we are confident she will make an excellent contribution to your School of Science.

A-LEVEL HUMANITIES EXAMPLE



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[X College] is a large institution with over 1,000 students, 530 of which will achieve A-levels this year and progress onto apprenticeships or higher education in September. Our sixth form college teaches a wide range of subjects across STEM, social sciences and the humanities. All students are given the option of dropping a fourth module after completion of their AS-levels as we find most students concentrate on their stronger modules in A-levels once doing so – this is optional and the decision is entirely left with the student. We also offer the opportunity for students to take an EPQ if they feel they have the capacity alongside their A-levels to do so.

Peter is an enthusiastic and eager student at [X College]. It has been evident that Peter likes to rise to a challenge and set himself high goals; he has never turned down an opportunity to gain more experience (both in his studies and other commitments). Peter has excelled as a Senior Prefect and House Captain, and also achieved the Silver Award in the Duke of Edinburgh scheme, not to mention a Level 2 qualification in Lifeguarding. Peter is a very approachable and level-headed individual who is always happy to help his peers, contribute to group work and team-building tasks, and accept responsibility when helping the school run activities and events; for this, he made an ideal candidate for Head Boy.

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.

BTEC QUALIFICATION EXAMPLE



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[X College] is a small, non-selective sixth form college which opened in 2007. We have a cohort of approximately 600 students from the local community and neighbouring towns. 5 A*-C GCSE achievement is low in the local area; to cater to this, our student qualification entry is an average of 4.7 GCSE points (lower than the college average of 6.2). The college has a current total of 345 students in year 13 and offers courses at levels 2 and 3, including A-levels and BTECs in Business, Sport Sciences and Coaching, Film Studies, and Journalism.

Jordan has proven to be an outstanding student throughout his studies at [X College]. His prudent and concise work is excellent in all areas; this is palpable in both his written assessments, such as the analysis of nutrition and the impact on metabolism, as well as his practical work, where he has specialised in American football for his sports coaching unit. Jordan has excelled in his Extended Diploma in Sport and Exercise Science and successfully demonstrated his ability to produce high quality work. He is predicted to achieve an overall grade of Distinction*, Distinction*, Distinction.

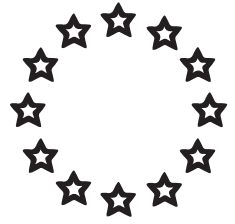
Jordan has paid close attention to various areas in the study of Sport and Exercise Science which he is keen to develop further at university. Particularly, Jordan has demonstrated key research skills in his assessment of the effects of smoke and intoxication and the physiological responses this has on the body, analysing the extensive impact this has on long-term use. Moreover, Jordan's communication skills have proven outstanding in his written coursework as well as his oral presentations; concisely

demonstrating his understanding of subject-specific terminology in his sophisticated arguments.

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.

EU REFERENCE EXAMPLE



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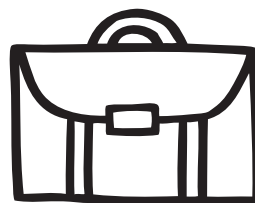
[X School] is based in Germany offering Realschulabschluss, Mittlerer Schulabschluss and Zeugnis der Allgemeinen Hochschulreife levels of study. We have a total of 1,200 students in the school with an additional 213 students graduating and moving on to higher education. Our students in upper secondary education study a variety of subjects across the humanities, social sciences, and science and health, and over 67% of students achieve an overall mark of 2.5 or above.

Alexander will be graduating from [X School] in June 2018. He sets himself high standards in all subject areas, particularly media studies and journalism. His excellent participation in class projects and his enthusiasm for developing his skills further is admirable; he is very eager to find answers, discuss work with teachers and advise his peers to produce work of high quality. Alexander has demonstrated a keen interest and talent for film production and journalism; he has excelled in his practical studies, directing and filming a three-minute video trailer, as well as his written work, as illustrated in his modernised re-write of Robinson Crusoe in the form of a newspaper article. He produces insightful and high-quality work in English, demonstrating no hindrance that English is not his first language.

Alexander's passion and creativity in his subjects has inspired him to develop his skills further in creative writing and film studies at university. Alexander has demonstrated creative and sophisticated skills in his film assessment, supported by his exploration in the approaches and context of literature and productions; a few examples he has looked at are surrealism, versions of modernity, and the renaissance. Alexander has also shown his commitment and interest in developing the school journal (newsletter) as well as the school's annual productions; he is an eager, strong-willed individual with a can-do attitude. His positive behaviour and eagerness to learn has led him to excellent results in his studies and work outside of the classroom.

Alexander is very meticulous and hardworking, qualities well-suited for further study at university. He has demonstrated a range of skills at [X School] and would flourish in a university environment; I strongly recommend him to study humanities at your institution.

MATURE STUDENT EXAMPLE



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[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.

Jessica proves to be a positive, hard-working and approachable individual who is more than capable at managing her time and workload effectively. She demonstrates effective research skills and passion in her work, and a positive approach to group work as well as independent study. She has endeavoured to support her academic work with relevant voluntary experience to contribute to her sociology and psychology skills; over the last two years, Jessica has volunteered in a variety of environments, working with a range of age groups, including a pre-school, nursing home, rehabilitation centre and Samaritans helpline.

Her patience, understanding and dedication give us confidence that she will excel at university and in the clinical psychology profession. With this in mind, we have no reservations about Jessica's potential to study at your university and we are confident she will make a very successful contribution to your department.



LOOKING FOR MORE INFORMATION AND ADVICE?

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UCAS offer helpful toolkits and guides.
Head to their website for more details.

▶ www.ucas.com/advisers

And 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

www.essex.ac.uk