

How to Write a Reference

What is a UCAS reference?

UCAS references are designed to provide universities and colleges with an **informed** and **academic assessment** of an applicant's **suitability for further study**.

How do I find where to write it?

You'll either receive an email from UCAS or the application will be available in Adviser Track. For each student, choose their referee from the list. This name will appear on the reference, even if another member of staff actually writes it.

Tip! It is usually wise for a different member of staff than the referee to **Approve** the reference in UCAS Apply before the *application is sent on to UCAS for processing*.

How and when are references used?

1. As part of selection:

- Information about the college can give **context** to rest of application: i.e. the opportunities the student has had.
- Information about the applicant can give **context and support** to their **academic achievement and to their personal statement** – e.g. supporting and evidencing claims around motivation, skills and personal attributes.
- **Exceptional circumstances** – can enable an offer to be made when otherwise it might not.

2. For 'near misses' at confirmation

3. In clearing

Before starting...

The best references are not written in isolation; they are based on **discussion with the student** about their strengths, their plans and their achievements. Before you write the reference, find out about the student's career goals, chosen HEIs and courses, and the entry requirements, skills, experience and knowledge needed. Also find out if there are any mitigating circumstances that should be included.

It is strongly advised that you read the student's application (including their personal statement) before writing their reference.

What to include? A common format

1. Information on the College
2. Special circumstances (if applicable)
3. Subject-by-subject report
5. Concluding endorsement
4. Suitability for the chosen course

1. Information on the college (keep it brief)

- The size and type of college and its year groups and classes.
- Typical numbers and patterns of qualifications and progression to HE.
- Your centre's curriculum policy - information about the curriculum offered, the awarding bodies and the choice and number of subjects they have to select from. Include why the school or college chose to offer the provision that it does, and what the considerations were when deciding this. **Note:** This is particularly important given the significant changes that have happened to both academic and vocational qualifications in recent years – check out '**SPA's National Expert Think Tank guidance for schools and colleges**' on what to say about qualifications in the applicant's reference.
- Include any involvement the applicant has had in Widening Access, Gifted and Talented initiatives or Partnerships for Progression.
- If a student differs from the typical college profile, explain how.

2. Contextual Information (if applicable)

- Any contextual information which might warrant special consideration. This could include individual circumstances – e.g. mature student, disability, widening participation activities, or information about your college which may affect performance, such as significant staff changes, or damage to buildings.
- Any mitigating factors that might affect their performance, for example serious, acute or chronic illness, or significant adverse personal circumstances (with applicant consent). This will mean that course providers have more than just grades to take into account.

3. Subject-by-subject report

- Their post-16 academic performance and their potential for success in higher education.
- Existing achievement and details of performance from subject teachers (best first), with particular reference to subjects relating to the courses for which they are applying or any information you might want to add about performance in individual units of qualifications that the student has not already given in the personal statement.

4. Suitability for the chosen course

- Why they are suited to their chosen subject and career path, plus their attitude, motivation and commitment.
- Skills and qualities like aptitude and enthusiasm, plus current or past achievements that will help with their chosen subject area.
- Achievements, work experience, and extracurricular activities that relate to their chosen course(s).

5. Concluding endorsement

- Other activities/achievements, personal qualities
- Strength of support for application
- Further information as appropriate about any special circumstances, e.g. how the student is supported, what effect the issue has on the student's performance

Predicted Grades

Predicted grades are requested in a separate box (rather than within the reference text). It is expected that the person who is a named referee also predicts the grades. Where this is not the case, the reference section should highlight who is predicting the grades.

It is important to be **honest** and **clear** and as **up to date as possible** at the time of submitting the application to UCAS (they cannot be updated later with UCAS – you should inform HEIs directly if there are changes and explain them).

If predicted grades are not a reflection of their true abilities, it is useful to state why the student has been disadvantaged and what their intellectual potential ought to allow them to get.

Over 40% over-predict:
Can lead to offers that cannot be met - clearing

Around 10% under-predict:
Can result in no offer

Writing References: Key Points

- You can use up to **4,000** characters or **47 lines of text** (Inc. spaces and blank lines)
- References should be written in a word-processed document first, then copied and pasted into the application. If you type directly into the reference section in Apply **make sure you save it regularly**.
- With the correct permissions, a reference can be changed after it has been marked as complete or approved. **It cannot be changed once it has been sent to UCAS.**
- Some learners may be very new to your organisation at the point of application (for example, learners studying the Access to HE Diploma). In this situation, inform UCAS that you are prepared to provide an **additional reference later** in the cycle, once more information is available
- Sometimes applications from the same school/college are seen at the same time...so **don't duplicate the reference**
- **Do not name** any colleges or universities they are applying to - you remove some of the 'invisibility' and could compromise the application.
- You can write the reference in advance, but you need to read what the student has written in their application before you finalise it.
- There's **no need to repeat** anything the student has already given, unless you want to comment on it to reinforce a point.
- **Don't assume** that all admissions staff are familiar with vocational qualifications, especially new or revised vocational qualifications and revised Access to HE Diploma courses.
- Avoid making errors with a **student's name or gender**, typically seen when referees cut and paste the content. It implies that you might be writing the same thing about everyone.

Final points:

55% of references are written within 5 weeks of the deadline (Aimhigher 2008)

Admissions tutors spend approximately 3 minutes per application (Aimhigher 2008)

*All admissions tutors would make the same plea to referees, that they keep it **clear, simple and concise** – and use a reasonable font size, ideally **font size 12**, remembering that **UCAS will reduce the finished article to half size.***

Remember:

Reference providers have a duty to the person who is being written about and to the prospective university (and potentially to a future employer or professional body) receiving the reference.

- Submitting an inaccurate reference may expose the reference provider (the individual and / or the college) to legal liability.
- Providing a false positive or negative reference, or failing to disclose potential 'risk raising' information can leave the reference provider open to legal liability.

Further Information

[https://www.ucas.com/advisers/references:](https://www.ucas.com/advisers/references)

Information on how to provide a reference for an HE applicant, including a link to the '*Guidance for school and college references - what HEPs would like to know*' created by SPA's National Expert Think Tank (NETT).

You can also come and see one of the NCOP Linking London staff or email us on:

ncopinfo@linkinglondon.ac.uk

