References and Letters of Recommendation

References and letters of recommendation sound similar but they are not the same thing.

- **References** (sample) are a list of people (3-5) employers can call to discuss your skills, abilities and fit for a role. Employers usually ask for this list in the final stages of interviewing or when they are close to making an offer.

- **Letters of recommendation** are often required when applying to graduate school, a scholarship or sometimes a job (this is less common). The letter is written by someone who knows you, your work and abilities and can specifically address why you are qualified for this opportunity.

**References:**
More than eight out of ten human resource professionals said that they regularly conduct reference checks for professional (89 percent), executive (85 percent), administrative (84 percent), and technical (81 percent) positions (according to a Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) survey).

**Who should you ask?** Former supervisors (from co-ops, professional jobs, summer jobs, work study), colleagues, and/or professors. Choose people who know you well and can speak to the quality of your work, what you were able to accomplish, your relevant skills, strengths and character. Supervisors, for whom you worked in relevant role or industry, are always the most powerful references.

**How to ask:** Ask in person if possible (and if not, email or phone, not text). This is a formal request. Ask in a way that someone can easily say no. Eliminate those who are not comfortable giving a good reference or don’t know you by asking: “Would you be comfortable serving as a reference for me?”

**Managing references:** To maintain your references and help prepare them, follow these steps:

1. Once a company starts checking references, call your references to notify them. This gives them a heads up and a chance to tell you if they will not be reachable (traveling or on vacation).
2. Follow the call with an email with the following components:
   a. Open with a thank you for serving as a reference
   b. Briefly describe the employer, the opportunity and three bullets with just a word or two each on the top things this employer is looking for in this role (that you have)
   c. Attach your resume and the job description
   d. End: thank them again and tell them to contact you with any questions they may have

**Check on the progress:** Contact the employer to see if they have gotten in touch with everyone. If they haven’t been able to reach someone, try to resolve it or provide an additional reference.
Follow up and thank you to references: Let them know if you got the job and thank them. They will appreciate hearing the outcome and be willing to serve as a reference again.

Letters of Recommendation:

Ask someone who knows you well and can provide a strong recommendation (usually a supervisor or professor). Give them at least two weeks to complete the letter. Provide the information they need: see 2. b and c. This letter should be tailored and leverage their knowledge of why you are a strong candidate.

Content and Structure of Letter

- Why they are writing
- How they know you and for how long
- Why you are well qualified for this role
  - Characteristics, skills, knowledge/expertise, specific achievement(s)
- Wrap up with recommendation statement
- End with contact info and invitation to discuss this further

Although I do not recommend using a template, if you ask someone who has never written a letter of recommendation, this article may be helpful. I also recommend you follow up and thank people who wrote you a letter of recommendation.