



### Reference Writing Guide for Supervisors

#### Support for student/graduate employability:

It is clear that reference writing can be time consuming and tricky for many of us, but all staff have a responsibility to support our students/graduates in achieving high quality destinations, whether these are in work or further study. The following is intended as a quick guide, to clarify and ease the process. For more detailed guidance, please view the documents listed at the end of this document.

#### Purpose and types of a reference:

Most employers request a reference at some point during the job application process. This may be before a candidate is invited for interview; between a first and second interview; or after a position has been offered. The purpose of a reference is to verify facts and to gain your opinion on the candidate.

Employers may provide you with specific questions, possibly in a pro-forma, or they may make a more general request where you will be expected to compose a letter. Occasionally you may be asked to give a verbal reference, but the University advice is to avoid this if possible. If you do provide a verbal reference you should transcribe the conversation or ask for a copy of the employer's notes.

These notes provide a guide and are by no means exhaustive. Please see Resources section below for more detailed information.

#### Content checklist:

- Introduce yourself and explain how you know the candidate.
- Brief outline of how the degree programme at York provides skills relevant to the position (use the Departmental Employability Plan).
- Candidate's attitude to studying and research.
- Academic record and expected degree classification.
- Involvement in extra-curricular activities, including work experience (use the student's Employability Plan).
- Specific skills (you may be asked how the candidate has demonstrated- the student's Employability Plan should also be helpful for this and look at the Person Specification for the job).
- Personality/ Character (draw on your personal experience of the candidate but remember to keep it positive! You may also like to consult others who taught them/ access any notes made about them on their student record).
- Career interests, if relevant (again the student's Employability Plan may provide this).

#### A brief guide to the 'Do's and Don'ts' of reference writing

##### Do:

- Get the candidate's consent if an unsolicited reference request is made.
- State your relationship to the candidate, length of time you have known them and any limits on your ability to comment e.g. if you have to write a reference for a student who was not known to you (in this case consult any staff who taught the candidate as you can quote them in the letter). Similarly, if you are asked to comment on an aspect of the candidate of which you have limited or no knowledge, make it clear- e.g. integrity "I confirm that I do not know of any reason that would call into question X's honesty, integrity or trustworthiness".

- Respond to requests as soon as possible.
- Be fair, as you have a duty of care both to the candidate and employer.
- Be specific and back up any statements with evidence. For example “ X demonstrated diplomacy, the ability to negotiate and work well with others during group projects” has more impact than simply saying “ X has good team working skills”.
- Mark the reference “PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL”.
- Include a disclaimer “This reference is provided in good faith but no liability is accepted in relation to its accuracy” (Please note this only provides *limited* protection from potential legal action).
- Only make statements you are *qualified* to make. For example, “I consider X to be well suited to this position” is preferable to stating “ X will be a success in this post”.
- Check there are no outstanding disciplinary proceedings against the candidate.
- Make use of the student’s Employability Plan, as this should provide a record of their skills and experiences, career aims and achievements.
- Make use of the Departmental Employability Plan, as this details how your department helps students develop their employability (your departmental Careers Liaison Officer will have a copy).

#### Don’t:

- Confuse fact and opinion.
- Refuse to write a reference without giving clear reasons to the employer, as an unexplained refusal implies a negative opinion.
- Write anything defamatory, as this can lead to legal action.
- Disclose any discriminatory information, e.g. religion, disability, age, race etc.
- Disclose any sensitive information (e.g. info on physical or mental health) without express consent of the candidate.
- Use ambiguous or coded language.
- Write detailed references for some and only provide minimal details for others, as this can lead to legal action.

#### Further Resources:

- University Data Protection Policy and Guidelines  
[www.york.ac.uk/recordsmanagement/dpa/dppolicy2002.htm](http://www.york.ac.uk/recordsmanagement/dpa/dppolicy2002.htm)

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**Example reference:**

THE UNIVERSITY *of* York

**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY**

Heslington, York, YO10 5DD

**Senior Lecturer**

**Professor Verity Smart**

Telephone (01904) 999999

E-mail: v.smart@york.ac.uk

**PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL**

25<sup>th</sup> June 2014

F.A.O. Mr Smith  
Coffee Beans Inc,  
Dorchester Road  
London  
NW1 3QT

Dear Mr Smith,

I refer to your email of June 24<sup>th</sup> requesting a reference for Joseph Blogs. I am Joseph's Academic Supervisor and have known him since October 2009. I have had regular supervision meetings with Joseph throughout this time and have also had experience of working with him in his Modern History modules. As Chair of the Board of Studies, I have also met with Joseph in a number of formal meetings through his role as Board of Studies Student Representative.

The History programme at York demands high intellectual standards and enables the development of a range of skills, which Joseph has clearly demonstrated throughout his time here. In particular, I have been impressed by Joseph's ability to communicate ideas clearly and in a well-informed manner during seminars and Board of Studies Meetings, often successfully persuading others to his view point. The programme encourages independent research and the development of original ideas throughout the three years and Joseph has displayed a methodical, mature approach in the planning and execution of his work, particularly his dissertation which won the Essay Prize 2012.

On a personal level, I have enjoyed working with Joseph. He has proven a bright and personable student with a positive, hard-working attitude. Joseph's close involvement with the student media, in particular York Student's Television Society, has allowed him to develop his creativity and understanding of different technologies, a skill he successfully transferred to his dissertation which involved the innovative inclusion of a short historical documentary which he researched, filmed and edited himself. Comments made by Joseph's Debating Historical Practice module tutor note his willingness to contribute to these sessions and the quality of these contributions. They also identify his ability to encourage other, less confident colleagues to contribute.

In our supervisory meetings, I have been impressed by Joseph's focused attitude. We have spoken on many occasions of his passion for the Coffee industry and he has made full use of the careers resources here at York and taken a pro-active approach to gaining relevant work experience, both locally in a coffee shop and via volunteering in Costa Rica. I have enjoyed reading his "coffee blog" and hearing about his internship at Nestle in the Buying department.

I can also confirm that I do not know of any reason that would call into question Joseph's honesty, integrity or trustworthiness.

Joseph's academic performance is demonstrated by his module results, which put him on course for a II (i) final award.

Joseph's character, skills and academic performance suggest to me that he is highly suitable for a Graduate Trainee Buyer position.

If I can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

**Professor Verity Smart**, Senior Lecturer

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