

Writing UCAS References



Writing UCAS references

- What is the purpose of a reference?
- What should a reference look like?
- How do you decide a pupil's predicted grades?
- What do admission tutors look for?

What is the purpose of a reference?

The role of the reference

- To support the student's application and personal statement
- Allows you to add context and to explain anything, which is not obvious or straightforward
- Important at different stages of the application process for different institutions
 - Application stage
 - Borderline cases
 - Confirmation and clearing

What should a reference look like?

Process

Students

Ask them to provide information about themselves (pro forma and /or discussion) and to compile grade predictions

Subject Teachers

Provide specific comments from their academic classes and predicted grades

Personal Tutor

Provide a statement on their personal qualities and attributes that are relevant to the course they are applying to

Tutor (UCAS applications)

Assembles the reference using all of the above; tidies everything up; focusses relevant comments; removes repetition etc.

Structure

Contextual paragraph

- Key information about the school

Academic performance

- Suitability for the course
- Predicted grades, educational obstacles, reasons for grades

Extra curricular activities / personality

- Anything else you think universities need to know

Recommendation

- Future potential

Contextual paragraph

- **Start the reference with:**
 - Information on size of school / college
 - Progression rate to HE
 - Pattern of qualifications ie. Typical number of A-levels
 - Additional information esp. any indicators of deprivation (FSM)
 - Has the student taken part in any access programmes? (RO)

What do you think?

“Leicester School is a non selective school situated in inner city Leicester. It serves a diverse community and more than 50% of pupils receive free school meals. The school has 100 students, of which, 15% progress onto higher education. Most students study a combination of BTECS and A-levels.”

Academic performance

- **Key information about academic performance**
 - Performance at post-16 to date
 - Motivation, attitude and commitment
 - Potential to succeed on a particular course
 - Why the course suits them academically
 - Specific details about their performance in that subject
 - Mention any extenuating circumstances
 - Link to predicted grades

What do you think?

“In History, Phil has developed skills in researching widely, and selecting and synthesising evidence. His work on American policy in Vietnam demonstrated an ability to critique sources adeptly, resulting in a well-structured and clearly argued essay which considered the formation of policy from a range of divergent perspectives. Phil has strong potential to develop further as an undergraduate. His predicted B grade is based on her most recent essay work.”

Extra-curricular activities and personality

- This section should include anything that the student didn't write about in their personal statement but believe will enhance their application
 - Any achievements that link to their course
 - Any personality traits that will help them succeed at university

What do you think?

“Katie is an exemplary student. She is very hard working and extremely well-organised, always meeting deadlines and can be relied upon to complete any task with minimum fuss. Displaying quiet ambition, Katie is unfailingly pleasant, polite and helpful.”

Recommendation

- The reference usually ends with an overall view about the candidate's ability to succeed in higher education and the course chosen.

What do you think?

“Brian is polite, thoughtful and hardworking. He has thought carefully about his choice of studying government and politics and his enthusiasm for the course is clear when speaking to him. We really recommend him for Higher Education.”

Putting it all together

- **4000 character limit / 47 lines**
 - Text cut off over this limit
 - All formatting removed
- **Same reference for all 5 applications**
 - Same advice as for students. Don't apply for radically different courses.
 - Universities don't want 50/50 personal statements or references
- **Background information on the school**
 - Only if it is absolutely necessary in the context of that student's application. Don't use it to "sell" the school/college
- **Completed reference added to online application for final checking and submission by senior 'authorised' UCAS contact**

How do you decide a pupil's predicted grades?

Predicted grades

- Need to be an accurate representation of what you genuinely believe that student will achieve
- Check the student is not applying for courses with unrealistically high grades
- Borderline cases – opt for the higher grade as there's a good chance the student will achieve this
- Ensure grades are referring to the correct qualifications
- Pressure from parents/students?
- **Explain in the reference** if predicted grades are inconsistent with achievement to date
 - AS level performance – extenuating circumstances?
 - GCSE performance – late bloomer academically?

What do admission tutors look for?

Top tips



- Do write clearly and simply, and submit a readable reference
- Do write each reference from scratch (where possible)
- Do check the personal statement to help write a complimentary reference
- Do check which courses the student has applied to, the grade boundaries, and subject specific requirements for those courses
- Do use concrete examples to back up statements
- Do explain uncommon/unusual qualifications
- Do be concise
- Do clearly indicate if you are supporting/recommending this student

Top tips – Don't...



- Don't hide bad predicted grades in the text
- Don't ignore the personal statement
- Don't need to have the reference written by the head/principal
- Don't mention universities by name
- Don't paste in stock phrases
- Don't use bland templates and just change the name
- Don't repeat information found in other sections of the application
- Don't raise weaknesses unless documented, evidenced and communicated to/discussed with student/parents
- Don't be negative – omit things you can't be positive about

Advice from our admissions tutors

- “It may seem like an obvious point to make, but many references are plain and generic and could have been written about anyone. I have also seen the occasional one where the teacher has forgotten to change the name of the student from the last time they used the reference.” **Dr Daniel Attenborough (Law)**
- “Include something on how well this student might be suited to studying in HE (not just in academic terms but in terms of independence, organisation, etc.). Try to avoid repetition/overlap with personal statement – the reference should ‘add value’ to the application.” **Dr Patrick White (Sociology)**
- “Do check the information on the school that goes above the reference is correct (e.g. the number going on to higher education etc). Frequently this information is muddled (e.g. the school has 100 people in the sixth form and sends 230 to higher education each year). Don’t use a reference template for students and forget to change their gender to the correct one ‘Samantha has performed very well in English. He always....’” **Dr Kate Loveman (English)**

Advice from our admissions tutors

- “Detailed prediction for each subject is good. ‘If they work hard could achieve a B’ ‘should easily achieve a B’ – this gives a stronger feel for the likely grades. References that talk about the course not the student are not so useful.” **Dawn Wedd (Economics)**
- “I like to see a paragraph from each of the subject teachers about the student’s particular aptitudes in their subject... although I don’t tend to find things of the ilk “Jane got 113/120 UMS in her Unit X exam....” especially illuminating if it doesn’t make clear why this marks this student out as particularly good” **Alex Mack (Interdisciplinary Science)**