

Writing Successful References

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Last year, a member of Faculty was contacted by an individual on the admissions committee of one of Dalhousie's professional schools suggesting that our university's students were not always well served by the type of references submitted on their behalf. The aim of the following sample letters is to provide some guidance for those who are called upon to write references in support of the increasing number of our students who go on to graduate or professional programmes. On behalf of the Faculty Development Committee, I should like to thank the various individuals from both Faculties, who have provided suggestions and sample references. In addition, the admissions committees of both the medical and law schools at Dalhousie have very generously provided copies of references, with comments, that have been submitted to them on behalf of applicants to their programmes.

Suggestions for Writing Good References

What the Student Should Provide the Referee

In order for the Faculty member to be able to provide a successful reference, the student should be asked to supply the referee with:

- a detailed, up-to-date curriculum vitae including information on interests, student involvement, in organizations, volunteer activities, past awards and achievements, work history, and such academic information as the degree received, the supervisor's name, and thesis title.
- a copy of the transcript
- submission deadlines for each application
- a copy of a personal statement, if that is required in the application
- addressed envelopes

Ted Wright – and now the other members of his Department – requests that the above information be provided to each referee in a file folder, with a list of the universities or positions, along with the deadlines for submitting references, attached to the inside cover.

Goals for the Reference

The primary purpose of writing a reference is, of course, to assist the individual in gaining admission to the programme or to be offered the position for which he or she is applying.

- one individual at Stfx, who is often asked to provide references by current and former students, has suggested that the main goal in writing an effective reference is impression formation: creating a vivid sense not only of the student but also of the department from which he or she is graduating and of the university as a whole.

More specifically, the following have been suggested by various Faculty members as goals a reference writer should strive to achieve:

- to demonstrate enough effort on your part to communicate the impression that you really want the student to achieve her or his goal
- to make your reference memorable, given the hundreds that may have to be read
- bring the applicant alive

- to make clear that the applicant is graduating from a strong programme in a superior institution: “sell Stfx as well as the student”

Emphasize the Advantages that we have at Stfx

- small university with high standards where we can get to know our students far better than would be the case in a larger institution
- as a largely undergraduate institution, we treat our stronger students almost as if they were grad students

Ideas of What to Include in the Reference

About the Student

- in an Honours, Advanced Majors, or Major programme?
- on the Dean’s List?
- comment on communication skills, both oral and written: talk about seminars or oral presentation the person gave; papers and essays
- “asked if I could put a copy of her essay on reserve in the library for use of the following year’s students as a model”
- one might comment on: computer skills, information retrieval from library, knowledge of foreign languages
- “make specific and detailed references to the student’s honours thesis or to other research experiences the students has had on which you can comment.”
- actual grades in courses, decile placement, and ranking in class
- leadership potentially as evidenced by:
 - awards earned (e.g., prizes, medals)
 - executive positions held in campus organizations
- work or volunteer experience within the Department
- volunteer experiences or activities
- employment, if relevant to topic of application

About Stfx and the Department or Programme

- mention, for example, the size of the university, of class(es), or the honours programme
- mention the number of students who go on from this programme, if impressive
- if writing for a foreign institution, emphasize how our grading practices may differ
- if the student has taken six credit courses from you, their advantages can be emphasized (e.g., depth, inter-related assignments, reading primary material)

General Suggestions or Comments for Writing Effective References

- think about what would be valued, and address that: i.e., research for those going on to graduate school – indicate all the research experiences that the person may have had
- read any admission criteria carefully and frame your letter with these in mind
- Winston Jackson suggests that, “if possible, make comparisons of the current candidate with others from Stfx who you know to have attended the same programme. Phrases such as ‘in the same category as Mr. X or Ms. Y’ or ‘probably slightly stronger methodologically than Mr. Z’ are helpful to admission committees.”

- always append a letter to a form; this implies you know the person well and care enough to wish to support her or his application by “going out of the way”
- avoid general adjectives; give specific examples
- there is very wide agreement that the length of a reference letter should be more than one page but less than two
- make it realistic, particularly in ticking off boxes on forms: do not put the person in the same box [see comments with the law school references]
- “I find some of the questions on the printed forms silly, and I don’t try to fill them in. Much of the time, for example, I have no idea of how a student gets along with peers or what his or her ethical level may be.” [It is not, however, a good idea to avoid such issues for professional school applications.]

Points that Need to be Made

Our grades tend to be lower than those given at many other universities. At some universities where our students might apply there is, nonetheless, the mistaken perception – e.g., in certain professional programmes at Dalhousie – that we give higher grades than they do. Since the evidence is to the contrary, one needs, therefore, to counteract this impression as much as possible and to provide information that will encourage those on admission committees to give our students a “fair hearing.” One could, for example:

- indicate the student’s standing in his or her class
- give the student’s decile rank in the course
- indicate that the student was in the top 10% (or 5 or 25) of the class
- give the student’s standing in the final couple of years in the entire Faculty (this information is provided on the transcript, but it is useful to point it out again)

Tactics: How to Deal with Specific Issues

Poor Performance in a Given Year: Deal with Directly

- “It is my impression that it is best to bring problems in a student’s background out into the open, rather than to try and pretend they don’t exist. Mention it head-on and then give an explanation.” This is one good way to make a reference memorable; it is probably unusual enough to really make the reader ‘sit up and take notice.’

Sample References

For a Student Applying for a Position Involving In-house Training

[This reference was written by a faculty member at another Nova Scotian university]

“I have been requested by Mr. A to supply you with a letter of reference in support of his application for the position of.... Mr. A graduated with his Bachelor of Arts in 1998. He was a student in my second year class in [a professional programme]. He achieved a respectable grade of 75. I recall him as a regular class attendee and as one who readily contributed to class discussion. The course was taught in a small group, and it involved several components such as written exercises, a seminar, and the standard three-hour examination.

Mr. A is a mature student. It has been my experience that students who enter university somewhat later in life do not handle traditional examinations with the same facility as those who come straight out of high school. I thus note that Mr. A did fairly well in my course (with multiple components), and is [another course in the same professional programme], the other course required of all students in this programme (in which he also achieved a grade in the mid 70s). His other courses were somewhat lower, resulting in an overall average in the “C” range. Mr. A’s grades improved somewhat in the third and fourth years, with some grades in the high 70s and 80s. His average each year was in the “B” range. I would conclude that Mr. A’s performance is demonstrative of a mature student who by sheer dogged determination is able to achieve his goals in spite of life pressures that may not affect younger students who have the ability to concentrate more fully on academic studies.

I found Mr. A to be a serious, somewhat quiet, but well-intentioned man. I believe him to be a person of high integrity. I did not get to know him very well on a personal level, but I am unaware of anything of a negative nature which should be brought to your attention in assessing his application.

I would be happy to discuss Mr. B’s application further should you so desire.”

References for Professional School

Law School The following references sent to the Dalhousie Law School have been made Available to us, along with comments from the Director of their Admissions Committee.

A Good Reference: “I am writing to support the application of Ms. B to the LLB programme at Dalhousie Law School.

Ms. B was enrolled in my course on [an area of law] last year. In this large, second year class, she distinguished herself through her willing to participate in discussions. Her work in this course was in the range of B+/A-. Her performance in examinations was somewhat more impressive, with an average of A-. Her written work in term essays improved from a B to A- by the end of the year. She also took a leading role in one of the most impressive group presentations in the class that year. She impressed as an individual with a high degree of motivation and self-confidence, who maintained a collegial manner as well.

Last fall she took my advanced seminar course on [another area of law]. She again produced work in the A- range, and showed a commitment to participation in small group discussions and in the seminar itself. She maintained a perfect attendance record in this course and turned all assignments in promptly, despite suffering a leg injury which restricted her mobility for much of term. She is confident and well spoken, able to communicate her views and defend her argument effectively.

In addition, she has an active extra-curricular record in student union activities. She acted as researcher for the student union, and volunteered for numerous student government committees as well as organizing charitable funding for cystic fibrosis. She also served on the Community Awards Committee, comprised mainly of senior administrators, and on a committee to select the recipient of the university’s Alumni Award for Teaching Excellence. Hence, she has a record of community involvement and organizational experience that will serve her well in a legal career. She demonstrates strong academic capabilities and commitment which should make her a strong candidate to perform well in law school. I recommend her to you without any reservations.”

Comment from the Law School: “This is a reasonably good one – the referee has taken the time to provide a thoughtful evaluation. It contains both objective and subjective assessments. The boxes that are checked off [i.e., two in the “excellent” category, the rest “above average”] indicate some thought has gone into evaluating each category (i.e., not all categories are marked “above average”).”

A Poor Reference: “Ms C was one of eight students in a small community health clinical course. I came to know her reasonably well and she has remained in contact with me since her graduation from the University of Alberta. Ms C has a wealth of practical experience and a great deal of maturity. She is a keen student who enjoys learning. I’m certain she will succeed at anything she determined to do!”

Comment from the Law School: “This one doesn’t tell us much at all. No particular focus on whether the student would do well in law; most of the written assessment simply summarizes how well the professor knows the student; no evaluation of the student’s intellectual capabilities; boxes checked off [i.e., all in the “above average” category] don’t demonstrate that much thought went into the evaluation.”

Medical School The following references sent to the Dalhousie Medical School have been made available to us, along with comments from a member of their Admissions Committee.

Poor Reference #1: “I am writing in support of Mr. E’s application to medical school. I had the opportunity to observe him when he was a summer student in my laboratory from June to September of 199x. I would [sic] him to be an outstanding addition to our lab. He learns very quickly, mastering laboratory techniques such as PCR, in a very short time, with little or no previous bench experience. He understands the process of designing and carrying out experiments in a very advanced fashion. His project over the summer involving using [sic] site-directed mutagenesis to create several mutants of the mu-opioid receptor. He was extremely motivated, worked very hard and had extraordinary success in making 4 separate mutants which have now been expressed in stable cell lines. This work will result in co-authorship on 1 or 2 manuscripts as they are written. He reads widely in the subject area and was a frequent participant in our laboratory meetings and discussions of his and other members [sic] work.

Mr. E. is a very talented young man with a very clear idea of what his ultimate career goals are. He wishes to combine research with clinical medicine and seeks to have a career in academic medicine.

I have no hesitation whatsoever in recommending him for a place in medical school, and I have every confidence that he will succeed. He is exactly the sort of person we should nurture and encourage for the future.”

Comment from the Medical School: “3/10: Too academic. Nothing on character, qualities, personality, etc. Is this person a book worm? How is anyone to know? Is he interested in people and patients? Nothing here to suggest he is.”

Fairly Good Reference: “Ms. F. took two undergraduate courses (BIO 3136: Animal Behaviour: BIO 3149: Population and Community Ecology) that I am teaching in the Department of

Biology, Univ. of Ottawa. Because these courses involve several different learning situations (lectures, movies, discussions, research project), I know Ms. F. quite well.

Ms. F. is a gifted student who was always well prepared for all class activities. She is not afraid to express her opinion and made many valuable contributions to discussions on selected problems. Ms. F. is a well organized person who tends to proceed very logically when solving problems. She can express herself orally very well and her writing skills are also very effective. As a result, Ms. F. was one of the top students in the two classes. In addition, she is a very pleasant and well-mannered person who can get along with anybody.

Both of my courses have a research component (research project). This allowed me to assess Ms. F.'s research potential. Based on my knowledge of her, I conclude that she has the personal qualities (intelligence, organized and logical approach, willingness to work hard, constructive criticism, ability to solve problems in original ways, personal manners) that are necessary for becoming an excellent physician. Based on this, I fully support her application for studies in your department and recommend that you seriously consider her application. If you needed any additional information about Ms. F, please do not hesitate to contact me."

Comment from the Medical School: "7.5/10: Pretty good. Covers academic and personal qualities. The only thing missing is extracurricular involvements. Is that because he doesn't do any or because the writer isn't aware that she does play volleyball, squash, etc.?"

Good Reference: "Mr. G is an enthusiastic and committed volunteer in the woodworking program at the Colonel Belcher Hospital. He makes significant contribution to our program. In his volunteer role with us, he is punctual, confident, and ambitious. He also exhibits mechanical skills and dexterity. His duties have required him to repair machines, cut and assemble a wide variety of projects, as well as to work with disabled residents.

Mr. G has, in the course of his tasks, shown excellent communication skills with the residents. He is able to relate to both aphasic and dementia residents. His easy and calm manner, ability to join in with unfamiliar groups, and his being able to engage in meaningful conversations have made him a valuable asset to the program. His gregarious and compassionate personality with both residents and staff make him a good team worker.

While working with this capable and mature young man, one acquires a sense of well-rounded and diverse experience in community volunteerism. His ability to learn and adapt to new environments shows in his academic achievements. In addition to fulfilling his required responsibilities, Mr. G has shown initiative in participating in programs not specifically required of him, programs such as exercise sessions, weekly social activities, semi-annual bazaars, outdoor picnics, and barbecues. His judgment, humanitarian ideals, and goals make him an excellent candidate for the role of a physician. [Rehabilitation Therapy Assistant]"

Comment from the Medical School: "8/10: Very good. You get a sense for the person's character. There is nothing on academics (of course the Rehabilitation Assistant is not in the realm of academics), but that can be determined from the MCAT and the transcript. The only basis for judging the more personal qualities is the references."

Superior Reference: [This reference was written by a StFX faculty member in support of a successful application to Medical School.]

“I have known M. H as a student at St. Francis Xavier University since the beginning of the 1997-8 academic year, when she took my [Humanities X]. This year she is in the sequel, [Humanities XX]. She is a friendly student, and I have had several chats with her in my office. I also got to know Ms. H when I saw her escorting her parents at Alumni Homecoming, where I met them both. I saw her perform in the musical “Grease”, where she was the most energetic dancer on stage as well as the choreographer for the many dance numbers in the production. She also helped me organize the student talent for our class party. We had a fiddler, 3 guitarists, a bag-piper, a jazz drummer, and 2 step dancers. Ms. H was one of the latter. It was a great party, and she was a star.

Ms. H’s parents are very proud of their daughter, and with good reason. She is talented as a student leader, in dance, sports, social interactions, and academic endeavours. She was the top student in [Humanities X] with a grade of 88. I require class participation, either through a computer discussion group or class interventions. Ms. H regularly posted articulate questions or insights in the discussion group and even in the dead of winter, when most students were comatose, she listened well and answered questions intelligently in class. Her term papers were well researched and coherently written. This year in [Humanities XX] she has again distinguished herself in keeping up with the readings and making wise observations in class. She made 85 in the October quiz.

The BSc programme at Stfx is a very demanding, especially in [Science X], and yet Ms. H performs at or near the top decile in all her courses despite her heavy extra-curricular load. She was in the top 5% of her class in 1996-7, and top 8% in 19970\8 despite the enormous demands of the musical production in the second semester.

Her duties as a student resident director are onerous in the extreme. Between care for the girls having nervous collapses and putting the run to male drunken louts roaring their amorous intentions at 4 a.m., Ms H managed to study, serve on the University Senate, organize and take part in intramural sports for her residence, and volunteer for charitable endeavours. Her instinct for medicine can be seen in the types of volunteer activity she gets involved in: the R.K. MacDonald Guest House, the Sexual Assault Awareness Committee and the Antigonish Play School. Her summer employment at a Senior’s Hospital in Sydney Mines and at the New Dawn Guest House indicates her patience and good will and respect for her elders.

I hope Ms. H is not spreading her talents too widely. I noted her looking pretty tired in class the other day, with dark circles under her eyes. The Residence Director position at MacIsaac Hall – known as “animal house” – may be wearing on her.

I recommend Ms. H to you with pleasure and without reservation. She is bright, hard-working, and a high academic achiever despite a heavy commitment to extracurricular activity. She is lively, good natured, confident, polite, charming, and full of spirit. Despite her ambition and energy, there is nothing nasty or cunning about her in her climb to the top. She is totally honest and of noble character.

I have the deepest regard for Ms. H and give her my highest recommendation.”

Graduate School References

Copy of a reference written by a Stfx faculty member in support of a successful application to graduate school in psychology.

Ms. I has asked that I write in support of her application for admission to the graduate programme in the Department of Psychology at the University of ..., and I am delighted to do so: she is one of the most gifted psychology students that we have had at St. Francis Xavier University over the more than twenty years that I have been associated with the Department. Arlene graduated with a First Class Honours degree in 199x. She came to the University as an Oland Scholar, our largest and most prestigious scholarship for an entering student. Throughout her university career she received top marks, whether the course was in french, psychology, or statistics. At the time of her graduation she received the University Silver Medal, awarded to the student achieving the highest average in the last three years of the Bachelor of Arts programme, as well as numerous other prizes and awards. Since graduation she has worked in the theatre, in a research position, and is currently working in Europe to hone her language skills.

Ms. I, as noted above, graduated from the Psychology Department at Stfx in 199x. She was the top student among the fifteen honours psychology graduates of that year, a close-knit group of individuals who collectively made up one of those remarkable classes that come along only very rarely. The other fourteen students are all currently in graduate or professional school, and Arleen is now applying to join that number.

I have known Ms. I since the beginning of the 199x-199x academic year. During the earlier years, she took a number of full year courses with me, and we have remained in touch since she graduated. In her junior year, for example, she took both my course in [psychology x] and the non-credit departmental Junior Seminar for which I am responsible. Both of these are courses required of honours students, and each has an enrolment of between fifteen and twenty. Students are required to participate actively in class discussions, to present seminars and, in the case of the [psychology x] course, to submit a number of extended written pieces based on individual research. In that course she received the departmental prize awarded to the top student in the honours [psychology x] seminar.

In her senior year, Arlene took a six-credit course I give in [psychology y]. There is a heavy library research and writing component in this course and, by the end of the year, all of the students will have submitted at least 70 typed pages of text reviewing the most recent empirical and theoretical literature on all aspects of a [specific type of topic]. In Arlene's case, her completed set of papers ran to well over 100 pages. She located an impressive collection of sources, read them intelligently and analytically, and presented her information in a manner far superior to that which our average honours students has at her or his command. Arlene's papers were so superior that I asked her permission to place them on reserve in the University Library so that future students might use them as a model of what really excellent papers look like. I have since had a number of comments from students, expressing their amazement that an undergraduate could have written in such a sophisticated manner. Arlene's performance on examinations was, of course, equal to the quality of her essay writing, as her very high average and many academic awards will testify study.

I also had contact with Ms. I through the Department's Senior Seminar of which I am the coordinator. This course aids our students in the preliminary stages of their thesis work. Although I was not her thesis supervisor or second reader, I did chair the sessions at which the students presented their thesis proposals and, in the spring, their completed research, to the Department's Faculty members and the other honours students. The quality of Arlene's oral presentation was predictably excellent; she didn't just present a talk, she actually taught. And her research appeared to be both interesting and original, although her thesis supervisor would be in a better position to comment on this topic. Arlene is obviously comfortable in the lab and, for an

undergraduate, she has had extensive research experience. In addition to her thesis research and the several courses she took in which part of the requirements was an individual or group research project, she also spent summers working in the lab of Dr. X, with whom she also did her thesis. Working on research, Arlene is one of those individuals who “makes the project her own”. She thinks about the ideas until she understands them very clearly, and from that point she will not only work independently, but comes up with ideas for improvements in methodology, data analysis, or what have you.

What was perhaps most impressive about Arlene was the ease with which she completed her academic work while at the same time involved in an amazing array of extracurricular activities. She is a very accomplished actress and has had extensive experience in the theatre. Her accomplishments in this area were acknowledged in her senior year at the University when she received a “Theatre X” for her “extensive contributions to Theatre Antigone”. She also was awarded a “Silver X” from the Students’ Union for her involvement in many aspects of student life. Arlene is also a well-trained and very experienced musician.

In addition to her extracurricular activities at Sfx, Arlene also found time to volunteer with the local Big Sisters organization, tutor ELS students, teach computer skills, and do academic tutoring in psychology and statistics. We all wondered where on earth she found time for so many activities, yet she always seems in control and in a good mood. Arlene is so wonderfully intelligent and so astonishingly organized that demands that would overwhelm most of us are met with the greatest of ease. I’m sure there must be some things that she would be unable to do, but I have yet to discover what they might be!

At the same time, Ms. I is an interesting and – not surprisingly – a confident person. She is mature for her years and has excellent social skills. While someone with her talents and accomplishments might easily arouse envy and jealousy in others, Arlene is such a thoroughly decent and pleasant person that she has a wide circle of friends. They, like the faculty, seem to accept that she is a bit of a phenomenon and not someone against whom to compare oneself. She is also interested in others and has the capacity to interact easily with a wide spectrum of people from diverse groups and backgrounds.

I should like to recommend Arlene to you with the most positive of recommendations. She is a very able – and highly likeable – person who also possesses those qualities of intellect and character that are essential for success in graduate work in psychology. While you might find the adjectives I have used in relation to her “over the top”, Ms. I really is an exceptional person and will make an excellent developmental psychologist. With her commitment to and skill in research and her excellent powers of communication, she is a “natural” for an academic career.”