Reference Writing for UCAS

Education Liaison
Middlesex University
Aims & Objectives

• What is a UCAS reference?
• Who writes the reference?
• What to include in a reference?
• Examples of references
What is a UCAS reference?
What is a reference?...

...and what are universities looking for?

• It is your honest, fair and relevant assessment of the candidate’s potential to succeed at a higher level in the chosen subject
What is a reference?...

…and what are universities looking for?

• Places the applicant and their actual/predicted results in context

• Supports the candidate in their personal statement

• Valuable piece of information for admissions tutors since not completed by applicants themselves
Who writes the reference

• Written by a member of staff who knows the candidate and his/her performance
  — A teacher who teaches the student
  — A tutor who is in contact with those that teach the student

• Usually, the progression/form tutor collates information from subject teachers and other staff members (SLT; support services) and assembles the reference
What to include in a reference

A few paragraphs detailing the following:

• Opening paragraph - contextual information about:
  — the school/college
  — the student

• Academic content

• Closing paragraph
  — suitability for the course
Contextual information

1. Contextual information about the **institution** – a typical paragraph

   • **Size and type**
     
     • Total number of students at the institution
     • Number of students in year 13
     • % of students expected to progress to higher education that year
     • Overall GCSE and A-level / level 3 performance
     • Qualification type at level 3 / faculties
     • School policy e.g. certification of AS-levels
Contextual information

• Any other information which may have impacted on student’s performance
  – Teacher shortages e.g. non-subject specialists delivering courses
  – Changes in teaching staff
  – Changes in qualifications
  – Funding pressures influencing choices of qualifications offered

• **Note:** to save space you can post a statement on a page on the school website and provide a short link
2. Contextual information about the **applicant**

- Anything that might warrant special consideration e.g.
  - Have they changed qualification. If so, tell us why?
  - English as a second or third language
  - Are they eligible for free school meals

- Any mitigating factors e.g.
  - Illness
  - Bereavement
  - Domestic disruption
Contextual information

- Contextual information about applicant’s local area
  - Geodemographic data e.g.
    - socio-economic characteristics
    - first generation HE
    - rate of progression to HE in neighbourhood
Contextual information

• Contextual information about applicant’s learning difficulty / disability (LDD)
  • Disclosing a LDD on UCAS does not disadvantage their application - fully confidential
  • How do they cope in the classroom with their LDD
  • Academic support in school/college
  • How will they cope with the demands of HE
Academic content

• ‘Real and concrete examples of how the student has performed are the most powerful thing to put in a reference’ – David Winstanley, Head of Undergraduate Admissions at the University of Sussex

• May be structured in 3 paragraphs: one for each subject
• What type of qualification is applicant studying?
• Current academic performance
  — Performance in class
    • Are they on target to achieve their predicted grades?
    • Narrowly missed a higher grade at AS?
Academic content

• Explain big changes in attainment e.g. predicted grades are much higher than GCSEs

• How do you determine predicted grades, e.g. internal assessments

• Talk about student’s potential: self-motivation or enthusiasm for a subject + skills demonstrated

• Potential but under extenuating circumstances, not able to perform for forthcoming exams – useful to know
Academic content

• Relevant work experience
  — If part of the course and tutor has visited student, then comment on their performance
  — Exception: teacher training – teachers should comment on student’s suitability for the course
Academic content

• **Enrichment activities**
  
  — Skills and aptitude demonstrated particularly relevant to university e.g. critical thinking
  
  — Subject specific activities e.g. university visits – impact on student
  
  — High performance in project/competition: what did they do to achieve that?
  
  — Applied subject knowledge to project?
Academic content

• Access courses
  — In most cases, teachers would have just met students
  — Coursework yet to be completed
  — Can send an updated reference later in the year directly to specific university
  — Reintegration into routine and discipline of academic study
  — Coping with demands of work and study esp. important for nursing/midwifery students with demanding shift patterns
Predicted grades

What percentage of predicted grades are inaccurate?

A. 36%  B. 56%  C. 76%

What percentage of predicted grades are too optimistic?

A. 27%  B. 37%  C. 47%
Predicted grades

56% of predicted grades are inaccurate.

47% of predictions are too optimistic

If higher than previous attainment then explain why the student’s potential has increased.

9% are too pessimistic.

If predicted grades are not a reflection of their true abilities then explain why the student has been disadvantaged and what they ought to achieve.
Suitability for the chosen course

• Personal qualities
  — Those beneficial for university
  — Strengthen their application

• Career ambition
  — If in agreement, comment on their suitability
  — If not sure of applicant’s career choice, just comment on performance and suitability for university

• Last paragraph - end it in a powerful way
Top tips

• Read student’s application or talk to them to understand:
  — Their aspirations
  — Their experiences

• Give real-life examples
  — E.g. student’s contribution to a specific project

• Student’s consent before disclosing any personal information
  e.g. a disability
Top tips

• Do not refer to any course or institution explicitly
• Avoid repetition unless commenting on something
• Do not copy-and-paste references - very obvious to universities
• Applicant left school few years ago
  — Comment on their performance and potential when you knew them
• Take your time to get it right

  — ‘References are an important part of all applications but in marginal cases they are vital’. ‘They can make the difference between getting an offer or not.’ - Bob Savill, Head of Admissions, University of Chichester
BTEC qualification example

Strengths

• Provides detailed examples of student’s course-work: gives a good impression of his ability
• Provides evidence of student’s skills and extra-curricular activities
• Useful contextual information regarding enrolment but…

Weaknesses

• … What proportion progresses to HE?
• How does the student compare to the general college population?
• Predicted grades: how likely is he to achieve this?
• What evidence is there of independent learning?
Mature student example

**Strengths**

- Very good appraisal of student’s personality and abilities
- Useful information regarding Access to HE Diploma but…

**Weaknesses**

- … What proportion progresses to HE?
- More contextual information for college
- More detail of the student’s class work
- How has the student’s benefited from voluntary work/work experience?