

What employers can say in a reference

If an employer gives a reference it must be accurate and fair. The employer giving the reference can decide how much information they include.

Employment references can be either:

- a work reference
- a character reference

What a work reference says

A work reference is usually from a current or previous employer. It is sometimes called a factual reference.

Work references can be basic or detailed.

A basic work reference is a short summary of employment. For example, the employee's job title and the dates they worked there.

A detailed work reference can include:

- the employee's job title
- dates of employment
- details about their skills, ability and experience
- any current, relevant [disciplinary](#) records
- the reasons for leaving the job

A detailed reference can also include someone's sickness or absence record. However, an employer must follow discrimination law. The reference should not include any absences related to:

- disability
- parental rights – for example, maternity or paternity leave

Employers should only ask for the information they need.

The amount of detail included in the reference is up to the person who provides it, unless their employer has a specific policy on this. For example, some employers only give basic references.

A reference is not a substitute for making other checks. For example, checking if someone has the right to work in the UK.

[Use our reference request letter template to ask for a work reference](#)

What a character reference says

A character reference is usually from someone who knows the applicant well. For example, their manager, a mentor or someone they've volunteered for. It is sometimes called a personal reference.

A character reference can include:

- how the person writing the reference knows the applicant
- how long they've known them
- details about the applicant's character and personal strengths – for example communication or leadership skills
- the applicant's suitability for the new role

[Use our reference request letter template to ask for a character reference](#)

What a reference cannot say

References must not:

- be misleading
- include irrelevant personal information

All details about the person, their role or performance must be fair and accurate. If opinions are provided, there should be evidence to support the opinion.

For example, if someone's performance record shows they need to improve in a few areas, the reference should not say they excelled at the job.

References should not include details of:

- any adjustments – for example [reasonable adjustments](#) for a disability
- absence records – in relation to disability, adoption, maternity or paternity leave
- disciplinary records or any investigations – unless this is recent and relevant

References and discrimination

An employer must follow the law on discrimination when providing, requesting or checking references.

This means they must not disadvantage an applicant because of any of the following 'protected characteristics':

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

The employer giving the reference should not include any information that could be used in a discriminatory way.

For example, an employer must not disclose someone's disability in a reference. The recruiting employer might decide to withdraw a job offer because the applicant has a disability.

[Find out more about following discrimination law when recruiting](#)

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