

References

From the inception of your job search, you should be prepared for prospective employers to ask you for references. Therefore, you should prepare a list of references to have readily available. Do not list references on your resume or include the phrase “references available upon request.” Rather, use a separate page, entitled “References.” Your reference list should include your resume heading, the names of three or four references, their titles (where applicable), addresses, telephone numbers, email addresses and, when a reference no longer works in the same place where you worked with them, their previous title and employer. Prospective employers may ask for references during the interview. Other times they will contact you for references after the interview process. Typically, prospective employers will not call your references unless you are a finalist for a position.

It is imperative that your references know that you are listing them and that you keep your reference list current. Before naming someone as a reference contact him or her and request permission. Ask the person if they feel comfortable acting as a positive reference. When asking people to act as your references, you should offer to give them a copy of your resume. This procedure is not only courteous, but it prompts your references to think about your strengths. Keep your reference list updated, as memories fade. People for whom you haven’t worked in a long time may forget the specific qualities about you that are most valuable in supporting your candidacy.

Your references can be most effective if you keep them current about your job search, academic successes, and extracurricular activities. Continually provide your references with your most recent resume and describe to them the types of positions you are seeking. If you are asked for your references by a potential employer, contact your references and tell them about the position and how excited you are about the opportunity. Then, when they are called, they can better boost your candidacy.

The strongest references for legal jobs are current or former employers and law school professors who know you well and think highly of you. Employers like to see references from lawyers engaged in the kind of practice for which you are applying. Ideally, judges are the best references for judicial clerkships, corporate lawyers for corporate firms, defense lawyers for defense firms, and so on. But there are other people in good positions to help you, so think broadly when sizing up employers’ practice areas. If you need a defense lawyer as a reference but don’t have one, a plaintiff’s lawyer can be a good choice. If you want to prosecute and you do not know a prosecutor, a criminal defense lawyer can be a good reference. A criminal law professor could be another good choice. Be careful, however, to choose people who know your work firsthand and can meaningfully and positively talk about you. A law professor who doesn’t know you personally may be willing to act as a reference, but if all he or she says is, “I don’t really know this student, but she did well on my exams,” that assessment is as sterile as a transcript.

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I have to list my most recent employer?

Not to do so is a red flag to prospective employers, who may assume you left the position on bad terms. If you feel reluctant to include a recent employer on your reference list, speak with a career counselor about your specific situation.

While working at a law firm, I did much more work with a young associate than I did with any of the partners. Is it always best to list a partner?

As explained above, your strongest reference is one who knows you and your work product well and will speak highly of you. Therefore, if the majority of your work was for a younger associate, he or she may be the best person to list. If you have any doubt, you may want to discuss your situation with a career counselor.

I really want to list a visiting professor, but I do not have current contact information. What should I do?

You should only list references for which you have current contact information. If you have lost touch with someone whom you feel would make a strong reference, try to locate him or her. Remember, you should not list anyone as a reference without asking his or her permission.

How important is it to have a professor?

Employers are very interested in knowing the quality of your research and writing. Legal employers want references that can vouch for your legal skills and your potential as a lawyer. Therefore, including a law school professor as a reference is strongly recommended. Make an effort to get to know a few of your professors as early as your first year. Employers may take particular interest in speaking with a research and writing professor or a professor for a course in the prospective employer's practice area. As with all of your references, keep in touch with professors as you progress through law school.

BASIC FORMAT FOR LIST OF REFERENCES

[INSERT HEADING USED ON RESUME]

REFERENCES

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