



University of Essex



# REFERENCE WRITING GUIDE

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Your essential tool for supporting  
an application.

**OVER  
140  
SOCIETIES  
AND SPORTS  
TEAMS**

**UNIVERSITY  
OF THE  
YEAR  
2018**  
(THE 2018)

**GLOBAL  
COMMUNITY  
OF OVER  
16,000  
STUDENTS FROM OVER  
130  
DIFFERENT COUNTRIES**

**RANKED 22ND  
FOR INTERNATIONAL  
OUTLOOK**  
IN THE TIMES HIGHER  
EDUCATION WORLD  
UNIVERSITY RANKINGS 2021

**TOP 30  
IN THE COMPLETE  
UNIVERSITY GUIDE  
(2021)**

**7TH  
FOR SPEND ON  
SERVICES AND  
FACILITIES  
PER STUDENT**  
(THE TIMES AND SUNDAY  
TIMES GOOD UNIVERSITY  
GUIDE 2021)

**3 STUNNING  
CAMPUSES IN  
COLCHESTER,  
LOUGHTON AND  
SOUTHEND  
WITH EXCELLENT TRANSPORT LINKS  
TO LONDON**

# WHAT IS A UCAS REFERENCE?

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UCAS references are designed to provide universities with an informed and academic assessment of an applicant's suitability for further study. This is the only section of the application not completed by the applicants themselves which makes it valuable for Admissions Advisers, along with the predicted grades.

- When an individual is nominated as a referee they'll either receive an email from UCAS or, if they work in the school/college the applicant is studying at, the reference application will be available in Adviser Track.
- A reference may be up to 4,000 characters or 47 lines of text.
- The page will time out after 35 minutes of inactivity so it is important to click save regularly.
- Referees may save a copy of each reference they write for their own records.

**Remember, Admissions Advisers require the referees contact information so it's important they include the following details:**

- Relationship to the student
- Email address (using institution/college/school email where possible)
- Phone number
- Institution/college/school name and full address

## Top Tip:

Write your reference in Microsoft Word. When you are happy with your reference, you can copy and paste the text to the online application – just watch out for the character limit!



# WHAT SHOULD I INCLUDE IN A REFERENCE?

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If your reference is for an application to a university who regularly admits students from your school or college (for example, Essex Schools Membership Plus partners), contextual information about your school or college and qualifications can be less detailed. However, please remember that the same reference will be sent to all universities the student is applying to, so needs to be relevant to all.

## 1. Information about the institution/college/school

Below are some examples of information about the referring institution/college/school which could come at the beginning of the reference:

- Size and type of school/college
- Number of students in the applicants year group, and the proportion typically progressing to Higher Education (HE)
- Typical number of patterns of qualifications taken by students
- Information about school policy, such as certification of AS-levels
- Contextual information about the catchment

## 2. Qualification information for the student

- What type of qualification is the student studying?
- Details about the structure, content and marking scheme are helpful if the student is studying a non-standard qualification

## 3. Performance in class

- The student's academic performance in their post-16 education
- Performance in individual subjects

## 4. Specific or outstanding achievements/strengths/concerns

- Any personal qualities which will benefit them at university, such as skills, aptitude and enthusiasm.

## 5. Would you recommend them for university study?

- Their potential for academic success in HE
- Why the course they have chosen is suited to them – keeping in mind they might apply for a number of different courses
- Detail why you think they are suited for HE

## 6. Predicted grades

Predicted grades can be hard to estimate but it's helpful to mention if they are on target to achieve them, including information on their motivation and work ethic. This can be particularly helpful if their predicted grades are demonstrating a shift in academic ability from AS-levels or GCSE performance.

If the referee believes that the student has potential to achieve higher than they have predicted but, due to extenuating circumstances this won't be possible for the forthcoming exams, then this is also useful to know.



## 7. Work experience

Voluntary work or work experience that the student has undertaken. Including feedback from the provider of the work experience is helpful.

## 8. Additional information

### Extenuating circumstances

If the student's academic performance may have suffered due to personal or external circumstances, such as an ongoing illness, domestic upheaval, or the illness or death of a close relative, it is usual for this to be disclosed in the reference, rather than the personal statement. It is important for Admissions Advisers to be aware of anything which has hindered a student's performance at school. It is also important for a university to know if the student's personal circumstances may affect their academic performance in higher education.

Make sure you have been given consent from your student before disclosing any information about their health or a disability.

If the reference mentions external problems, such as the student being disadvantaged through continuous staff changes or the school being in special measures, it is important that the college/school addresses this in all references, to avoid any suggestion of inconsistency or bias towards a particular student.

### Students with disabilities, long-term medical conditions, or specific learning difficulties

Students are invited to disclose any disabilities, long-term medical conditions or specific learning difficulties in a separate part of the UCAS application. Some students may be reluctant to do so in case this disadvantages their application; please reassure these students that they will be considered on their academic merits and the level of entry that is required for their chosen course. We encourage students to tell a university about a disability, long-term medical condition or specific learning difficulty (especially where they have had academic support in place at school/college) as they may be eligible for additional support, personal and/or financial. This support may be delayed if the student waits to disclose their disability until they have started their course. Most university disability services will offer to keep any detailed information the student provides confidential whilst offering the student initial advice and guidance.

You should not give information about a student's health or a disability without their consent.

### Not currently in education?

For applicants who are not currently in education a reference from their current or most recent place of work can be accepted.

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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## **Is there a preferred layout for the reference?**

There are no official rules but many references are structured in separate paragraphs, one for each of the student's main subjects. There is usually an opening paragraph providing contextual information about your institution/college/school and background information about your student, and a concluding paragraph summarising your student's potential.

## **Where do I include the predicted grades?**

The referee can input the predicted grades at the top of the reference form on UCAS Apply.

## **Who should the reference be written by?**

The reference should be written by someone who teaches the student, or is in contact with those that teach the student (ie a tutor), and can comment knowledgeably on their academic performance.

The reference should be submitted by a member of staff who has specific responsibility for, and engagement with, the higher education admissions process. This may be a senior member of the school or college management team, but there is no requirement for the reference to be 'signed off' by the head of your institution. In many ways, the more remote the person completing the reference for the applicant, the less value this holds for the university.

## **Should the referee refer to the student's performance in specific modules?**

Yes, if the student has not already written about it in their personal statement and the referee feels that they may benefit from it then they may refer to their performance in specific modules. For example, if the student narrowly missed a higher grade in a specific module at AS-level then the referee may wish to mention this.

## **Should the referee include a reference for an AS-level subject that the student is not taking onto A-level?**

This is not essential but many references do include comments on a finished AS-level. It can be especially important if the AS-level subject has some relevance to the course that the student wishes to study at university.

## **How much detail should be given about the student's personality?**

If highlighting the student's personal qualities will strengthen their application then it is relevant, particularly if these qualities are beneficial to their academic capabilities or their career choice.

## **This applicant left our school two years ago and I don't know what they've been doing since. What should I write for their reference?**

It is best to write about their performance and potential when you knew them. If the student has mentioned what they've been doing in their personal statement, you may wish to comment on this.

**I was not aware of this applicant's career plans until I read about them in their personal statement. I am not convinced that they have made the best career choice.**

In this case, it is best to focus on the student's performance within their individual subjects and their suitability for university in general, rather than commenting on their career plans.

**English is a second or third language for many of my students. Does this need to be addressed in the reference?**

It is useful to know if a student's first language is not English and how well they are performing at school based on this. Admissions Advisers may ask for a separate English language test but this will be assessed based on their qualifications and academic history.

**Should I submit additional material or references, other than that provided through the UCAS process?**

Generally, the reference should include all the information that you believe is required to assist the Admissions Adviser in assessing your student's applications. However, if you need to contact the university after an application has been submitted, this isn't usually a problem. Bear in mind that a decision could have already been made.

## REFERENCE EXAMPLES

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Over the next few pages there are a few examples to give you an idea of what our Admissions Advisers are looking for in your reference.

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# A-LEVEL HUMANITIES

## EXAMPLE

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**[X College] is a large institution with over 1,000 students, 530 of which will achieve A-levels this year and progress onto apprenticeships or higher education in September. Our sixth form college teaches a wide range of subjects across STEM, social sciences and the humanities. All students are given the option of dropping a fourth module after completion of their AS-levels as we find most students concentrate on their stronger modules in A-levels once doing so – this is optional and the decision is entirely left with the student. We also offer the opportunity for students to take an EPQ if they feel they have the capacity alongside their A-levels to do so.**

Peter is an enthusiastic and eager student at [X College]. It has been evident that Peter likes to rise to a challenge and set himself high goals; he has never turned down an opportunity to gain more experience (both in his studies and other commitments). Peter has excelled as a Senior Prefect and House Captain, and also achieved the Silver Award in the Duke of Edinburgh scheme, not to mention a Level 2 qualification in Lifeguarding. Peter is a very approachable and level-headed individual who is always happy to help his peers, contribute to group work and team-building tasks, and accept responsibility when helping the school run activities and events; for this, he made an ideal candidate for Head Boy.

Peter is a highly-motivated student with a keen interest in pursuing a career in law. He was originally studying AS-levels English Literature, Religious Philosophy and Ethics, Psychology, and Law; although Peter worked hard to understand individual units and components for Psychology, he decided he'd benefit in his final year by studying three A-levels and the EPQ in Law, and therefore took the decision upon himself to discontinue Psychology after AS-level. Peter has approached his studies in a mature and organised manner and consistently submits work of a high standard.

In English Literature, Religious Philosophy and Ethics, and Law, Peter pays attention to detail and has excellent analysis skills. He thoroughly describes and evaluates his arguments, using evidence to effectively support his claims. Peter enthusiastically engages with classroom debates in Law and applies relevant principles in a sophisticated manner, referencing cases appropriately. His research and understanding of the subject is outstanding and highlights his dedication to his studies. As a result, he is predicted to achieve a grade A in Law at A-level.

Peter would be well-suited to study Law at university and he comes highly recommended to you without reservations in his capabilities to study the subject at degree level. His commitment, prioritisation skills and enthusiasm for his work are qualities that we believe will make him a great addition to your School of Law.



# BTEC QUALIFICATION

## EXAMPLE

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**[X College] is a small, non-selective sixth form college which opened in 2007. We have a cohort of approximately 600 students from the local community and neighbouring towns. 5 A\*-C GCSE achievement is low in the local area; to cater to this, our student qualification entry is an average of 4.7 GCSE points (lower than the college average of 6.2). The college has a current total of 345 students in year 13 and offers courses at levels 2 and 3, including A-levels and BTECs in Business, Sport Sciences and Coaching, Film Studies, and Journalism.**

Jordan has proven to be an outstanding student throughout his studies at [X College]. His prudent and concise work is excellent in all areas; this is palpable in both his written assessments, such as the analysis of nutrition and the impact on metabolism, as well as his practical work, where he has specialised in American football for his sports coaching unit. Jordan has excelled in his Extended Diploma in Sport and Exercise Science and successfully demonstrated his ability to produce high quality work. He is predicted to achieve an overall grade of Distinction\*, Distinction\*, Distinction.

Jordan has paid close attention to various areas in the study of Sport and Exercise Science which he is keen to develop further at university. Particularly, Jordan has demonstrated key research skills in his assessment of the effects of smoke and intoxication and the physiological responses this has on the body, analysing the extensive impact this has on long-term use. Moreover, Jordan's communication skills have proven outstanding in his written coursework as well as his oral presentations; concisely demonstrating his understanding of subject-specific terminology in his sophisticated arguments.

Jordan has participated in various extra-curricular activities for our college; his role as a student ambassador has given him confidence outside of the classroom and exercised his leadership skills during our open days, and higher education and careers events. Jordan has also taken a lead role in our coaching programme, working with a range of age groups in both local primary and lower secondary schools; he has participated in coaching classes, sports day activities and after-school activity sessions. Jordan is very comfortable working with others and has shown to be a compassionate individual; his commitment and enthusiasm for coaching and mentoring individuals has proven him a valuable member of the Physical Education department in representing our sixth form.

Jordan has demonstrated a wide range of academic and non-academic skills at [X College], in particular, he is confident at working independently and to a high standard, while maintaining key organisational skills in a busy environment. Jordan has shown that he possesses the skills and qualities needed to excel at university and we highly recommend him for a place at your institution without any reservations.

# INTERNATIONAL/EU

## IB EXAMPLE 1

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**I am delighted to recommend Nicole to you for her undergraduate studies. Nicole is a quiet, polite and hard-working young lady and it has been a pleasure to work with her this year. It takes Nicole a little time to “come out of her shell” but, her quiet nature belies her steely determination to do well in academic assignments and tests. She has carefully and methodically selected her courses and universities and I believe that she is a good fit for all of them.**

Nicole is an excellent Mathematics student and enjoys the subject a lot. Her maths teachers say that she is highly engaged in lessons and works well with her peers in class. She is always ready to answer questions, help her classmates, and takes fantastic, detailed notes. Nicole is very good at analysing questions in context and applying formulas to different situations. She has a very high work ethic and always gets assignments done on time. She strives to do her best every day and it shows through her performance in class. Nicole is one of the nicest, most polite students I have, and she is an absolute pleasure to have in class. I am confident that she will be successful in anything she puts her mind to at the university level and beyond. She also surrounds herself with students who are on task and who challenge her to perform highly.

Nicole chose to do her Extended Essay in Business Management and analysed the decision by Bosch to divest its Starters and Generators division. She worked hard at her extended essay and met all our internal deadlines. She used many tools to help her analyse her questions, also going beyond the Business Management syllabus such as models to analyse motives for corporate divestiture. This is a good example of the effort and energy Nicole puts into her work at school.

Nicole is also a talented musician, displaying an enthusiastic approach to this subject and has developed strong skills in both performance and creating during the two year IB course. She has an organised and careful approach to her composition pieces and her research work is well planned and written and shows her interest in discovering new and unusual music. Her organisational skills and eagerness to learn should give her every opportunity to succeed in the university environment. She also plays piano to grade 6 which demonstrates her dedication and skills in this area. At [X School], we do not currently offer Computer Science or Computer Design for the IB Diploma. Nicole therefore, teaches herself much about the subject in her own time. She is a keen designer and has produced various prototypes on her 3D printer at home. She also takes IB Chinese outside school and is therefore, bilingual in both her native Chinese and English. Having also lived in various countries, she is culturally and linguistically international. Here at [X School], we are very proud of Nicole and wish her the very best for her future studies.







# INTERNATIONAL/EU

## IB EXAMPLE 2

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**[X School] has over 1,350 students in the secondary section of the school, with 400 in years 12 & 13. The school is an IB World school and as a forerunner to the IB Diploma Programme (DP) the school prepares the students with the IB Middle Years Programme (MYP). Throughout the school, the medium of instruction is English. The IB DP is an academically demanding course that requires high performance across six subjects in addition to the other core values of the course: Theory of Knowledge, CAS (Community, Action & Service), and a 4000 word research paper, the Extended Essay.**

I have known Maria for almost two years in my capacity as Head of Economics and her Year Leader. Although Ukrainian is her first language, she is now essentially fluent in English. Maria is a very good student of economics. She always participates actively in lessons, is keen to help solve problems which we tackle in class in a logical manner and does not hesitate to ask searching questions which are helpful to herself and indeed the rest of the students. When necessary she will continue the discussion after class in an open and respectful way. She has a very good understanding of the more abstract issues of the IB diploma economics syllabus including numerical and algebraic problems.

She is hard-working and ambitious to do well in economics, which is clear from her whole approach to my subject. For her internal assessment she has so far produced two first class pieces; One considers the impact of recent American tariffs on China and the other on inflation in Argentina. In both cases she has used this opportunity to relate in an insightful and analytical way her understanding of the economic process to real

life examples. She chose to write her 4000 word IB extended essay in my subject; her topic being the impact of recent Russian protectionism on Ukrainian agriculture and she draws some compelling and cogent conclusions.

Her business studies teacher writes the following: "Maria's work is of a very high standard. She is equally at home writing longer evaluative answers and more focused numerical answers. She is able to make good use of relevant BM terminology to strengthen her arguments and does so whilst applying her knowledge to the case study data. She is a quiet but committed member of the class who contributes well to group tasks." Our co-ordinator for self-taught languages writes this: "Maria is taking self-taught Ukrainian A: Literature (Standard Level). The course is entirely self-taught and students are expected to plan, research and prepare autonomously for every phase of the programme. While many students find this challenging, Maria succeeded in adapting to this independent way of working from the start of the course. During our infrequent group and individual meetings, she has contributed pertinent questions that show her ability to analyse abstract concepts and processes. She has met every deadline of the course and the thorough approach which she has applied even to aspects of the course that are not assessed directly suggests that she is not just interested in a final grade but keen to maximise her learning journey."

As a Year Leader I know that Maria is respected by both staff and students alike and has excellent communication skills and engages actively in school life. She has a long list of achievements but I should mention her long-term commitment to our annual Model United Nations programme. I think Maria has shown interest in studying economics/ international relations for about as long as I have known her. She has natural ability underpinned by an excellent work attitude and I have no doubt in recommending her to your institution.

# INTERNATIONAL/EU LOCAL QUALIFICATION EXAMPLE

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**[X School] is based in Germany offering Realschulabschluss, Mittlerer Schulabschluss and Zeugnis der Allgemeinen Hochschulreife levels of study. We have a total of 1,200 students in the school with an additional 213 students graduating and moving on to higher education. Our students in upper secondary education study a variety of subjects across the humanities, social sciences, and science and health, and over 67% of students achieve an overall mark of 2.5 or above.**

Alexander will be graduating from [X School] in June 2020. He sets himself high standards in all subject areas, particularly media studies and journalism. His excellent participation in class projects and his enthusiasm for developing his skills further is admirable; he is very eager to find answers, discuss work with teachers and advise his peers to produce work of high quality. Alexander has demonstrated a keen interest and talent for film production and journalism; he has excelled in his practical studies, directing and filming a three-minute video trailer, as well as his written work, as illustrated in his modernised re-write of Robinson Crusoe in the form of a newspaper article. He produces insightful and high-quality work in English, demonstrating no hindrance that English is not his first language.

Alexander's passion and creativity in his subjects has inspired him to develop his skills further in creative writing and film studies at university. Alexander has demonstrated creative and sophisticated skills in his film assessment, supported by his exploration in the approaches and context of literature and productions; a few examples he has looked at are surrealism, versions of modernity, and the renaissance. Alexander has also shown his commitment and interest in developing the school journal (newsletter) as well as the school's annual productions; he is an eager, strong-willed individual with a can-do attitude. His positive behaviour and eagerness to learn has led him to excellent results in his studies and work outside of the classroom.

Alexander is very meticulous and hardworking, qualities well-suited for further study at university. He has demonstrated a range of skills at [X School] and would flourish in a university environment; I strongly recommend him to study humanities at your institution.



# MATURE STUDENT EXAMPLE

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**[X College] has a total of 360 students and offers various Access to Higher Education courses in the humanities and social sciences. As part of the course, students examine a range of topics in English literature, psychology, sociology, and criminology. Students are required to achieve 60 credits to obtain the Access to HE Diploma, consisting of 15 ungraded credits and 45 credits at pass, merit or distinction level. In addition to these core academic units, students are also required to successfully complete a 4,000-word dissertation project.**

Jessica enrolled on to the Access to HE Diploma in Social Sciences in September 2010 with the aspiration and motivation to progress on to a career in clinical psychology. She's been a strong student from the beginning of her course; her determination and dedication to her academic and voluntary work is admirable. Jessica has excelled in her individual subjects and continues to drive for a higher goal – her latest examination on media, culture and society is a testimony to this as she received a Distinction\*. Her ability to understand, organise and interpret key ideas is well-rounded, and her arguments, both written and verbal, are consistently communicated in a succinct and sophisticated manner.

Jessica proves to be a positive, hard-working and approachable individual who is more than capable at managing her time and workload effectively. She demonstrates effective research skills and passion in her work, and a positive approach to group work as well as independent study. She has endeavoured to support her academic work with relevant voluntary experience to contribute to her sociology and psychology skills; over the last two years, Jessica has volunteered in a variety of environments, working with a range of age groups, including a pre-school, nursing home, rehabilitation centre and Samaritans helpline.

Her patience, understanding and dedication give us confidence that she will excel at university and in the clinical psychology profession. With this in mind, we have no reservations about Jessica's potential to study at your university and we are confident she will make a very successful contribution to your department.







# LOOKING FOR MORE INFORMATION AND ADVICE?

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UCAS offer helpful toolkits and guides.  
Head to their website for more details.  
[www.ucas.com/advisers](http://www.ucas.com/advisers)

Don't hesitate to contact  
our friendly Admissions Team.

**T** +44 (0) 1206 873666

**E** [admit@essex.ac.uk](mailto:admit@essex.ac.uk)

[essex.ac.uk/information/professional-services/  
undergraduate-admissions](http://essex.ac.uk/information/professional-services/undergraduate-admissions)

Other resources and guides, as well as information  
about our annual teachers and advisers conference  
can be found on our website.

[essex.ac.uk/schools-and-colleges](http://essex.ac.uk/schools-and-colleges)

**essex.ac.uk**