

MEMORANDUM

To: My Current and Former Students
From: Eric E. Johnson
Date: May 18, 2017
Re: **Student References/Recommendations**

I am happy to serve as a reference for my students. As a teacher, I naturally want to see my students to succeed, and being a good reference is part of that. Thus, I've written this memo to help you help me do the best job I can as your reference. The closer you hew to my advice, the better I'll be able to do. (And I also recommend approaching other people for references in the way I set out in this memo.)

1. If you anticipate needing a recommendation or reference in the future:

If you are my student now and you anticipate you will want to put me down as a reference or have me write a letter of recommendation for you in the future, then it is helpful for you to let me know this at the end of the semester of the class you are taking from me. That way I can jot down some notes about your class participation, and I can use those notes in the future to help me write a reference letter or to refresh my recollection for taking a phone call on your behalf. You might also send me at that time your résumé (electronically, as a .pdf or .docx, for instance), for me to put in your file.

Then, in the future, keep in touch. Ideally, send an e-mail when you take a new job or something big happens in your career. I always like to know what former students are up to, and it helps me stay ready to be a reference for you.

2. If you need a recommendation or reference now:

Please send me all the information I need to be able to conveniently and effectively complete this task for you. It is not pushy for you to provide this information in your first e-mail to me asking me if I would serve as a reference for you. Think of it in terms of how you would, as an attorney, prepare a client or a partner. You ideally want to put in one place everything needed to get the job done.

It is best for you to send me one e-mail that contains all the information I need to do a good job for you. That e-mail need not be long, but it should concisely cover the following at a minimum:

- Process/procedure/mechanical information:
 - what you need, for instance:
 - to put my name down as a reference to be called
 - a letter of recommendation
 - a form filled out (sometimes used by graduate schools and bars)
 - what the reference is for
 - e.g., a clerkship, admission to graduate school, bar admission, a scholarship
 - if it is a written communication, to whom and how it should go
 - Include the name and full contact information for the person receiving the reference.

- If it is anyone but an American judge, please tell me specifically how the person should be addressed.
 - For instance, should the recipient be addressed as Ms., Mrs., Mr., Prof., Dr., Rev., or something else? Let me know. Many people are particular about how they are to be addressed, and it is helpful if you think about how this is best done.
- Be sure to include how it should be sent.
 - e.g., by e-mail, by submitting a web form, etc.
- If it has to go through a web-based system, please provide a link to explicit instructions.
 - ... unless it is for federal clerkship candidates—in that case, I can manage
- If the reference has to be submitted on physical paper and physically mailed, make sure you explain that.
- exactly when it is due
 - If it has to be physically mailed, make sure you specify whether the due date is when it must be mailed or when it must be received.
- Substantive information:
 - Tell me what I am shooting for in creating an effective reference for you.
 - If the letter is a generic one for a federal or state clerkship, for law school transfer admission, or for a Ph.D. program, then I have a good sense of what to cover. Otherwise, tell me whatever you can that will help me.
 - For instance: *This scholarship I'm applying for is specifically for students with strong writing, so to the extent you can highlight the strength of my writing, that will be very helpful.*
 - Give me any helpful context in terms of your goals and interests. If the opportunity you are seeking fits into your goals and interests in a particular way, let me know that.
 - For instance: *As you may recall, my ultimate career aspiration is to work as an environmental lawyer in New Zealand. The Environment Court of New Zealand Honors Program is understood to be the country's best introduction to the field for a new law school graduate ...*
 - Refresh my recollection as to any specifics or anecdotes that I might be able to use in your reference—particularly things about which I have first-hand knowledge. **The best content for a reference is specifics within the referee's personal knowledge.**¹ So I will use what notes and recollection I have to provide specifics, but don't be shy about reminding me of things that might be helpful.
 - For instance:
 - *As you may recall, you wrote on my essay, "This is some of the best student-written work I've read."*
 - *I believe class participation was a strength of mine. You might recall that I took the unpopular side of Smith v. Jones and tried to respectfully articulate the position that seemed to be opposed by everyone else who was speaking*

¹ My understanding in this regard is informed by having been on the other side, reading reference letters as a member of the Admissions Committee at the UND School of Law and from having read undergraduate admissions applications to my major at the University of Texas at Austin. A letter in which the referee repeats information from a résumé is usually ineffective, while a reference letter that speaks to specifics within the referee's personal knowledge is golden.

up that day in class.

- *You may recall that last semester, despite your no-eating-in-class rule, a classmate of mine who was eating Noisy McSmelly Brand Snack Chips began choking, and I was able to successfully perform the Heimlich maneuver.*
- If there's a lack of specifics within the scope of my personal knowledge, then that doesn't mean I can't be a reference for you. But the less I can say in terms of specifics within the scope of my personal knowledge, the less effective my reference is likely to be.
 - Along these lines, your best references are usually the people who have the broadest base of personal experience with you. If there is relatively little I can say in your favor, I might recommend that you preferentially approach other people to see if they can be a reference, and then come back to me if other referees don't work out.
- Helpful documents:
 - Please do not be shy about attaching or linking to any documents you think might be helpful. These might include, for instance, a webpage describing the thing you are applying for, your résumé, your written work for me, my prior written feedback to you, or anything that you think might be helpful for me in doing the best I can to be an effective reference for you.
- Note that if I've done a written reference for you previously, I will have that on file and can use that in drafting future letters. If I have drafted a letter for you in the past, you might remind me of that.
- Follow up.
 - If you need me to submit something, and if I've agreed to do it, then follow up with me to make sure I got it done for you. I similarly recommend you follow up with any other reference writers as well. They may appreciate the reminder, and at the end of the day, it's up to you to make sure your file is complete for whatever you are applying for. So long as you are polite about it, I cannot imagine anyone would see your following up as anything other than diligence and courteousness.

3. *If you are a former student and it's been a while:*

Ideally, back when you were in school, after you completed my class, you gave me a heads up that you might need me in the future as a reference. If you didn't, I may not be able to be as effective a reference as I would have been otherwise. But I am still willing to help to the extent I can. In such a case, it is particularly important that you do what you can to refresh my recollection about you as a student (see the bullet point for "Substantive information," above). Remind me what class or classes you took from me and in what years. Then update me about what you have been doing in the time since, and explain to me what you are looking for in terms of future opportunities. Also, it may be helpful if you send a photo of yourself as an attachment to your e-mail—particularly one from the time you were my student.