

What employers can say in a reference

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

References can be short or long – for example, a ‘basic reference’ or a ‘detailed reference’.

What a basic reference says

A basic reference (or factual reference) is a short summary of your employment. For example, your job title and the dates you worked there.

What a detailed reference says

A detailed reference (or character reference) can include:

- answers to questions from the employer requesting the reference
- details about your skills, ability and experience
- details about your character, strengths and weaknesses relating to your suitability for the new role
- how often you were off work
- disciplinary details
- the reason you left the job

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.

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 and discrimination

It's usually against the law for information on any of the following – known as 'protected characteristics' – to be used, whether providing, requesting or checking references:

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

For example, if an employer decides to withdraw a job offer because you have a disability that was mentioned in your reference.

The only exception is when a protected characteristic is crucial to do a job. In law this is called an 'occupational requirement'. For example, if a Catholic church wants to employ a priest and it is necessary for them to be Catholic.