

Title:

Letter of Recommendation or Letter of Reference - Which Is It?

Word Count:

871

Summary:

It so happens that there IS a lot of confusion about the differences and similarities between letters of recommendation letters and letters of reference. For instance; which is which, and why? How are they different? In what ways are they similar? This article clarifies that confusion.

Keywords:

recommendation letter, letter of recommendation, reference letter, letter of reference, character reference, recommendation letter, letter of recommendation, commendation letter, letter of commendation

Article Body:

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Of the more than two million annual visitors to my two main "writing help" Web sites, over 60% of them are looking for some type of letter-writing assistance, and of those, 50% are seeking help with writing a "letter of recommendation" or "letter of reference."

Why do so many people need help with recommendation letters over and above all other types of letters, you might ask? Well, the main reason is this - they are BY FAR the most difficult letters to write. The main reasons are as follows:

Letters of recommendation invariably have important implications because they are key to being accepted (or NOT) for such things as: jobs and promotions, college and university program admission, membership in clubs and associations, qualification for awards and scholarships, financial assistance approvals, entrance into special programs, etc.

The consequences for messing up a letter of recommendation can be gravely serious, and can actually change the course of a person's life - either your own life, or that of another person about whom you are writing the letter. (Just imagine screwing up someone's life because you wouldn't take the time or trouble to get a recommendation letter right!).

There is a great deal of confusion about the whole subject of writing

"recommendation letters". Many people have no idea of the differences and/or similarities among the various types of testimonial letters: recommendation letters, letters of recommendation, reference letters, letters of reference, commendation letters, performance evaluation letters, recognition letters, etc.

So, BEFORE you go any further, please let me briefly clarify a few points on this whole recommendation letter and/or reference letter issue so that you don't go charging down the wrong path unnecessarily, and end up with the wrong information about how to write the wrong type of letter for your situation.

It so happens that there IS a lot of confusion about the differences and similarities between letters of recommendation letters and letters of reference. For instance; which is which, and why? How are they different? In what ways are they similar?

It's confusing enough for the average person who only has to write one of these letters every once in a while. However, when you look into it in-depth as I have, and realize that many of the so-called "experts" don't even know the differences between a recommendation letter and a reference letter, the general state of confusion is very understandable.

CLARIFYING THE CONFUSION

Since I wrote my first book on this subject, I've been watching the whole issue carefully and have conducted additional research, leading me to conclude the following:

- Many people and institutions use the term "recommendation letter" to mean BOTH letters of recommendation AND letters of reference (about 2/3).
- Many people and institutions use the term "reference letter" to mean BOTH letters of reference AND letters of recommendation (about 1/3).
- Both groups are talking about essentially the same type of letter in their minds and they don't seem to realize that there are important distinctions between the two.
- Thus, those who use the term "recommendation letter" ALWAYS use that term. Those who use the term "reference letter" ALWAYS use that term.

... and "never the twain shall meet", as the saying goes.

The fact is that there are TWO major categories of such letters: Letters of

Recommendation and Letters of Reference. Within each of these categories fall a number of different types of letters, differentiated primarily by the category of addressee, the level of detail covered, and the specific purpose of the letter.

Below is how I have defined and differentiated them in my popular book on this subject Instant Recommendation Letter Kit - How To Write Winning Letters of Recommendation.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION - DEFINITION

A "letter of recommendation" is one that is specifically requested about someone, and therefore is always specifically addressed to a particular requestor. Generally speaking, letters of recommendation are usually employment-related, or college program admission and/or scholarship related.

Typical letters of recommendation are:

- Employment-related recommendation letter
- College admission recommendation letter
- Commendation or recognition letter
- Performance evaluation letter

LETTERS OF REFERENCE - DEFINITION

A "letter of reference" is normally more general in nature and is not normally addressed to a specific requestor. Typically, "letters of reference" are addressed as; "To Whom It May Concern" or "Dear Sir/Madam".

Typical letters of reference are:

- Character assessment reference letter
- College-related general reference letter
- Employment-related general reference letter
- General reference letters

Note of Caution:

It seems that somehow over the years, the line between the two types of letters has become blurred and many people and institutions now use the two terms interchangeably. As far as those organizations are concerned, both letters are exactly the same thing.

Accordingly, please note that many colleges and universities, as well as some companies and institutions, use the terms "recommendation letter" and/or "letter of recommendation" when referring to exactly the same thing as what many other

colleges, universities, companies and institutions call "reference letters" and/or "letters of reference".

So, when dealing with these types of organizations or institutions, MAKE SURE that you use whichever term they use, in the same way that they use it. DON'T try to convert them to your terminology. That will just confuse things and you will pay the price.