



Guide to writing a reference

legalaid.nt.gov.au/legal-information/our-publications/police-crime-court/guide-to-compiling-a-reference

This fact sheet explains how to write a reference for use in a criminal court matter. You can print a copy by pressing the print icon or [download a copy of the fact sheet here \(.pdf 55kb\)](#).

If you go to court, it is useful to give the court written references about yourself. A reference is like a letter to the judge about you and your life. References give independent opinions about your character and background for the court to consider.

The person who writes a reference for you is called a referee. Before you ask a person to become your referee, you must tell them why you have to go to court. **It is very important for the referee to know about any previous convictions you've had for the same type of charges and to mention them in your reference.** For example, if you have been convicted of assault in the past and you are going to court again now for a charge of assault, your referee needs to know this and mention it in your reference.

Your reference needs to include the following information:

Starting

- Address the reference to "The Sentencing Judge".
- The opening paragraph of the reference should state:
"I am aware that [your name] is before the court charged with [short description of offence(s), for example "aggravated assault" or "unlawful entry"]."

The referee should state that they have written the reference specifically for court.

Information about the referee

- The referee should say the period of time they have known you and how they know you.
- The reference should state what standing the referee has in the community in general (for example, they are a doctor, football coach, foreman at your place of employment, mayor, relative, teacher, etc).

Information about you

- The referee should give their opinion of you. This should include comments on what they know about your general character, reputation, background, current family circumstances, education and employment.
- Include any other information or comments that could be helpful or positive, such as

your contribution to the community (for example, you are a sports coach, volunteer, etc).

- The referee can include any other matter they feels is relevant, for example a comment on whether you have acted out of character in committing the offence/s. The referee may be able to talk about particular circumstances that may have led to you acting out of character.

Finishing

- Referees should be careful NOT to make suggestions about penalties, for example by suggesting a bond or a fine. That is the job of the lawyers.
- The reference must be signed and dated by the referee. If the referee holds any formal position (for example, bank manager, teacher, etc) they should include this. If possible, the letter should be written on letterhead from the referee's workplace or community organisation.

References are only helpful if they are specific. References that are too general and do not connect your general character with the offence(s) committed will be not be useful in court. It is a good idea to get more than one reference from a variety of people who have known you in different ways.

Ask your referee to keep your reference short (half a page to two pages). The judge will read the reference in court on the day.

If your referee needs help to write the letter, ask them to contact your lawyer.

For more information, contact the Legal Aid Helpline on 1800 019 343.

Contacts

Northern Territory Legal Aid Commission

Call the Legal Aid Helpline 1800 019 343 (free call)

People who speak other languages can access the Legal Aid Helpline by calling the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 13 14 50 and asking for the interpreter to connect them to the Legal Aid Helpline.

Disclaimer

The information in this fact sheet is current as at February 2019. This content is provided as an information source only and is not legal advice. It is correct at the time of publication, but laws change. If you have a legal problem you should seek advice from a lawyer.