

HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR REFERENCES



Many employers will ask you for a list of references, either when you apply, or upon arranging an interview. For some reason, they always want *three* references -- that's the magic number. When a potential employer contacts one of your former companies' HR department, that HR manager can only confirm your employment and give a few other specific facts. They can not issue opinions -- it's illegal. So your prospective employer wants to talk to someone who can give opinions and answer specific questions about you, someone who worked directly with you on a day-to-day basis -- a coworker, a client, a colleague, or best of all, a former supervisor. These people can give your prospective employer this information because you have given them permission to do so, by picking them as references. Now, your potential employer knows these people, whom you chose as references, are very unlikely to say anything negative about you, at least on purpose. Of course, they *could* badmouth you, if they wanted. But the employer just wants to know that you have been able to make a good impression on at least some of your former colleagues. So remember: **Do not give personal references unless asked.** The hirer doesn't want to talk to your best friend, or your LARPing buddy, or your significant other, or heaven forbid, your mom. They want *professional* references. In the one-in-ten-googol chance they do ask for personal references (really, only banks do that, when making loans), then you can provide them. But still, don't use your mom. **Only list people with whom you have worked.** Your college professor, local Rotary Club president or rabbi may love you to bits, but you didn't work with them. Only use references like these at the very beginning of your career -- and replace them with real colleagues as soon as possible. **Ask someone if they're willing to be a reference.** Always get permission -- don't surprise any of your former colleagues by giving out their contact info to strangers. Get explicit permission. You don't have to do this every time you give out their name -- just asking once is fine. Also, asking permission is a great way to make sure the reference doesn't intend to say anything about the sexual harassment lawsuit or the arson charges. **Get the contact info right.** It looks very bad when a prospective employer can't get a hold of your references. Very bad. If you don't even have this person's current phone number, than how well could you possibly know each other? **Don't list your parole officer as a reference.** Or your drug dealer. Or your 12-step sponsor. Unless she's also your mom.