Recommendation and Reference Letter

Recommendation and reference letters are different in both audience and purpose. Recommendation letters are either written to a known recipient that has contacted you or to a recipient for whom you have been given the contact name and information. A reference letter is typically written for an unknown audience.

1. Ethical Considerations:
   A. You should only write a letter if you have first-hand knowledge of the applicant’s skills or performance. If you do not work directly with that person, you should thoroughly research their performance and background before writing the letter.
   B. You must always be truthful.
   C. If you cannot give a good recommendation for a person, tell him or her that you are unavailable.

2. Conventions:
   A. Always ask for a copy of the subject’s resume to use as a guide for your letter.
   B. Write the letter in the business format. (Refer to the Formatting a Business Letter resource.)
   C. Either mail the letter or send it via email as an attachment.
   D. The length is up to you; however, you must consider that people are busy and may read hundreds of letters a day, so write well, don’t waste words, and try to keep to the business of recommending.
   E. Make sure you include a subject line (“Subject Line: Letter of recommendation for John Doe”).

3. Components:
   A. Introductory Paragraph: In this paragraph you are providing information on your credibility and your relationship with the applicant.
      I. Include your name and position.
      II. Include the applicant’s full name—this is important.
      III. Provide the length of time and the context in which you have known the applicant.
   B. Body Paragraph One: This paragraph is all about the applicant. Include information on the following:
      I. The applicant’s professional qualifications—years of experience, credentials, awards, etc.
      II. Specific examples of the applicant’s accomplishments.
      III. What sets the applicant apart from others who may be applying? Use specific examples.
   C. Body Paragraph Two: This paragraph addresses the skills and traits that specifically relate to the position for which the applicant is applying.
I. Do not mention characteristics that could be used to discriminate against the applicant, such as race, religion, nationality, age, appearance, marital status, disabilities, etc.

II. Skills that you should mention are communication (verbal and written) skills, intelligence, self-reliance, initiative, flexibility, willingness to accept responsibility, energy level, direction, interpersonal skills, ability to effectively handle conflict, teamwork, level of commitment, ability to lead, etc.

III. Emphasize the traits and skills that will speak to the position. Do not embellish or lie.

IV. Avoid phrases such as good, adequate, fair, reasonable, dependable, loyal, satisfactory etc.

V. Use words such as exceptional, significant, astute, articulate, versatile, creative, assertive, imaginative, qualified, dedicated, professional, dynamic, and innovative.

D. Conclusion: This is where you end the letter with one last bid for the applicant.
   I. You might mention the applicant in a positive light one more time.
   II. Restate your contact information for further assistance or information.
   III. End in goodwill.

4. Types of Recommendation Letters: The two most common types of recommendation letters are related to employment and academic applications.
   A. An employment-related recommendation letter is requested by a company regarding an applicant.
      I. The applicant has given your information to a company for the purpose of recommending him or her for a particular job.
      II. These types of letters are positive and should be written by someone who has intimate or first-hand knowledge of the applicant’s ability.
      III. Typically you will have been in some supervisory position of the applicant so that you would have the credibility and objectivity to write a letter about a person’s performance.

   B. A college/university recommendation letter is for an applicant who is applying for undergraduate or graduate programs.
      I. People who typically write this type of letter are former teachers, community leaders, faculty members, administrators, academic supervisors, or employers.

5. Types of Reference Letters: Reference letters are general and are typically addressed to an unknown audience. They provide basic job information: attendance, dates of employment, credentials, positions held, and ability to work well with others.
   A. A reference letter for a job applicant contains a positive statement that describes the person in a positive light. Typically, the applicant will submit these with his or her application letter.

   B. Character references are written when a person may apply for child care or domestic work. This type of letter will reflect virtuous characteristics like honesty, trustworthiness, and dependability.
6. **Intercompany Recommendations:** You may be called upon to write a letter that recommends a person for an award, a raise, or outstanding service.

   A. Commendation letters are often written by a fellow employee or by an immediate supervisor for the purpose of noting an employee’s exemplary performance that went beyond what is expected.
      
      I. These letters are often circulated between offices and are meant to nominate a person for an award or recognition of outstanding service.
      
      II. This type of letter may also be used to recommend someone in a community for an award.

   B. Performance evaluation letters are used to provide favorable critique of an employee.
      
      I. They may be written by the employee’s supervisors for the purpose of providing management with a critique of an employee’s work performance.
      
      II. They become a permanent part of the employee’s record and are used to determine raises, promotions, etc.