

How to Write a Character Reference

A guide for family, friends and colleagues writing to the Court.

No, don't use AI.

When things are written with AI, Judges can tell. AI hasn't gotten good enough to sound quite like a real human yet. Whenever you go for the easy way out, you end up paying twice the price. Humans don't all sound the same, **but Artificial Intelligence does.**

I know you think that this letter needs to sound amazing, **but it doesn't.**

It doesn't need to sound professional,
it doesn't need to sound fancy,
it doesn't need to sound like Shakespeare.

The **most effective reference letters** I have ever seen were ones written by a person with their own voice, with their own vocabulary, from their own mind.

So **write from the heart** and don't worry about it sounding like someone's PhD. The more you try to sound like someone that isn't you, the more a Judge will be able to tell.

Handwriting the letter is a great move, if you would like to do that.

BEFORE YOU START

This guide helps a person who is writing a letter to the Court in support of someone who is going to be sentenced for one or more criminal offences.

The first thing you must do is **make sure you are aware of the charges** to which the offender has pleaded guilty and for which they will be sentenced. Then make sure that you have seen a copy of that person's criminal history. This is required for you to be able to provide an informed view of the offender.

You should express yourself in your own words and feel comfortable with what you have written. Be aware that the prosecution may choose to question anything that you write. **If anything you say is false**, not only will it harm the case you are trying to assist, but you may also find yourself in serious trouble.

WHAT YOUR LETTER SHOULD DO

- 01 Be addressed "To the Presiding Judge".
- 02 Be dated.
- 03 Set out your name, address, and occupation or title.
- 04 State how long you have known the defendant and the capacity in which you know them (e.g. friend, relative, employer).

- 05 State generally how you have found them to be as a person, and any assistance they have provided to you, or to any club or association with which you are involved.
- 06 State that you are aware of the matter before the Court and that, in the time and capacity you have known the offender, you find the charge to be completely out of character. **Do not say this if their criminal record shows otherwise.**
- 07 Raise any circumstances you are aware of (e.g. employment, personal, health or relationship pressures) that may have affected the person's judgment in the lead-up to and during the time of the offence. This may include knowing that the defendant was under a lot of stress due to a family breakdown or work pressure, or any other matter that may have contributed to the person behaving in a way they ordinarily would not.
- 08 You may make observations about the person's response to the offending behaviour. For example, they may have expressed their remorse to you, or changed their habits (such as giving up drinking or drugs).
- 09 Relay discussions you have had with them about these proceedings, their attitude to their behaviour, and any insight they have shown into what got them into trouble in the first place.
- 10 If there is any other relevant matter, such as the hardship that may result from a particular penalty (e.g. loss of a driver's licence), you may include it. If you are unsure, check with the person's legal representative.
- 11 Set out your opinion of the person since they committed the offence(s). For example, that you still regard the defendant highly and do not believe they will re-offend.
- 12 Reinforce your opinion of the person and ask that the Court take these matters into consideration when sentencing them.

WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR

We are looking for people to stand up and say that the offender is a generally responsible, honest, hard-working, civic-minded and good-natured individual. Anything you can say about their good character would be very much appreciated.

WHEN YOU HAVE FINISHED

Please do not send your letter directly to the Court. Please make sure your letter is delivered to the lawyer as soon as possible. If you would like to discuss anything in this guide, please contact our office.

SAMPLE LETTER

Do not plagiarise this letter – the Judge will know. Use it only to see how a letter can be set out, then write your own in your own words.

Your Honour,

I provide this reference in full knowledge that Chad is being sentenced for one count of common assault.

I have known Chad for almost five years. Chad and I worked in the same Woolies for a number of years after I moved to Sydney. We worked with each other almost daily serving customers, and I can confidently say that I have some insight into what type of person Chad is. I have always found Chad to be honest, reliable and well-mannered. In this time, I have never known him to act in such a foolish and irresponsible manner. The Chad I have known has always acted with calmness and maturity. When Chad has made mistakes in the past, be it charging the wrong amount of money or putting items on the wrong shelf, I have always known him to take responsibility for his mistakes, and it was this feature of his character that was a strong factor in the beginning of our friendship.

Chad's commitment to his family, and to the care of his mother whose health is deteriorating with age, reflects incredibly well upon him. Although there are significant personal and material costs to himself, he has always strived to be there for his mother. Not only that, Chad is the type of person who will help other people when they are in need.

Chad has always appeared to understand that there are consequences to his actions, both positive and negative, and to consider those consequences before acting. I believe what Chad did is out of character. In the time I have known him, I have never seen Chad be violent or aggressive towards anyone, especially customers. I believe Chad may have been affected by the difficult financial situation his business was under at the time.

Having spoken to Chad about this matter, I can say that he was very embarrassed when he first told me. I understand that Chad has been very co-operative with the police and deeply regrets his actions. When Chad asked me to help him by providing this letter, I did not hesitate for a moment, because I believe he is truly remorseful and has learned his lesson.

Chad clearly sees that his actions have consequences not only for himself but, more importantly, for others. I believe he will become an even better person as a result of this incident.

If required, please do not hesitate to contact me by telephone or email.

Yours sincerely,

Your name – the date