

Getting a Reference

Selling Your Work · By Simon Townsend · 3 min read

All references are nonsense

but I will write you one IF . . .

I am not happy to write references for those students who have not been keen enough to rise to EVERY opportunity and challenge I throw out, whether it's asking for a FactSheet, filling-in a questionnaire or a chance to write an interview from a transcript.

Anyway, I believe all references are a waste of everyone's time.

Editors don't care about references.

Instead, editors want to see copies of articles you've had published. If you've paid good money and struggled through a whole course, you should have attempted to have something published to PROVE you can write publishable articles.

Yes, you have done well in your journalism journey, but the only PROOF that you are now a publishable freelance journalist is by having had something published. If you haven't at least submitted articles during your journalism journey, I'm reluctant to write you a reference.

But if you pressure me to write one, I have rules so that my references retain real value for my students:

[1] First of all, may I again give you my personal opinion? References are worth little. A reference might make YOU feel good, but employers don't take any notice of them. When I was a boss hiring people, I refused to read references. Some people were silly enough to send references from their mum, their minister of religion or a primary school teacher.

[2] GET REAL!! If you don't have photocopies of CLIPPINGS - your published articles to accompany your job application - you have little chance of getting the job anyway, even if your references are from the Dali Lama, Nicole Kidman and the Prime Minister.

[3] I will not write a reference unless you have fully and completely finished the course and actually received your qualification. Also, I would be reluctant to write a reference for a student who had never made the effort to submit an article for publication, throughout your journalism career. Even if you have not been published, send me copies of the articles you did submit. My greatest aim is to get you published and PAID before you gain your qualification.

[4] I am determined to maintain my own reputation in journalism. I want to maintain my reputation for writing honest references and ones worth noting. No one has ever been able to say: "Oh no, ANOTHER Simon Townsend reference in which he says this applicant is a genius. Bin it." I want professionals to go on saying: "A Simon Townsend reference. If he says this person is good, we'd best take a look at who he's recommending."

[5] I am willing to write a reference ONLY after all your assignments have been completed and your qualification issued, and NEVER before.

[6] I don't write "form" references. I write specific references about the particular student's work.

[7] I don't give out my phone numbers and absolutely under no circumstances will I give a phone reference ("refereeing"). Only a written one. As someone once said: "Verbal references aren't worth the paper they're written on."

[8] I don't always write uncritical references. That is, if there was a continuing problem right through all your assignments with say, poor spelling, factual errors, bad grammar or wrong punctuation, I will mention this.

(ARTICLES only - not quizzes, questionnaires or non-article assignments.)

[9] I have hundreds of students and do not keep copies of students' work. I need to remind myself of what you did, so I need you to put all your ARTICLES (your ARTICLES with my red ink edits and comments on them) into an A4 envelope and send them to me at . On the outside write: "For Simon Townsend re: reference, for [your name]" and seal the envelope.

(ARTICLES only - not quizzes, questionnaires or non-article assignments.)

[10] Under no circumstances will I be stampeded into speeding-up the process because the student has a deadline (a factor he/she should have thought of earlier). Mail the A4 envelope to me at :

You MUST include an A4 self-addressed envelope with FULL POSTAGE on it so I can post it back to you directly and quickly. If you don't, you won't hear back from me.

[12] If you send me course work other than your ARTICLES with my red ink edits and comments on them, I am not able to respond.

Sorry, it's a tough world out there . . .

Best of luck.

Simon Townsend

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