

Providing a job reference

An employer does not have to give a reference by law unless it's:

- in writing that the employer will provide one
- for certain financial services jobs regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) or Prudential Regulation Authority (PRA) – usually for jobs known as 'controlled functions' (you can find out more about [controlled functions on the FCA website](#))

If an employer has a reference policy this can restrict:

- how much they include in a reference
- who can give a reference on the employer's behalf

If an employer gives a reference it must be accurate and fair. The employer giving the reference can decide how much they include.

References can be short or long – for example, a 'basic reference' or a 'detailed reference'.

2. What a basic reference says

A basic reference (or factual reference) is a short summary of your employment. For example, your job title and the dates you worked there.

What a detailed reference says

A detailed reference (or character reference) can include:

- answers to questions from the employer requesting the reference
- details about your skills, ability and experience
- details about your character, strengths and weaknesses relating to your suitability for the new role
- how often you were off work
- [disciplinary](#) details
- the reason you left the job

The amount of detail included in the reference is up to the person who provides it, unless their employer has a specific policy on this.

What a reference cannot say

References must not:

- be misleading
- include irrelevant personal information

All details about the person, their role or performance must be fair and accurate. If opinions are provided, there should be evidence to support the opinion.

For example, if someone's performance record shows they need to improve in a few areas, the reference should not say they excelled at the job.

References and discrimination

It's usually against the law for information on any of the following – known as 'protected characteristics' – to be used, whether providing, requesting or checking references:

- age
- disability
- race
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

For example, if an employer decides to withdraw a job offer because you have a disability that was mentioned in your reference.

The only exception is when a protected characteristic is crucial to do a job. In law this is called an 'occupational requirement'. For example, if a Catholic church wants to employ a priest and it is necessary for them to be Catholic.

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If you're having trouble getting a reference, you can ask the employer who needs the reference if they'll accept:

- a reference from someone else, for example a manager or colleague
- a reference from a different employer
- a reference from someone you have not worked with but knows you well, sometimes called a personal or character reference

3. If you cannot get a detailed reference

Some employers have a policy not to give detailed references. If this is the case, ask if they can provide a basic reference instead.

For example, a brief written statement of your role and the dates you were employed.

As long as it's fair and accurate, a reference can show that you're not suitable for a job.

For example, a reference can show you do not have enough experience for a job or say that you were [dismissed](#).

4. When a bad reference can be challenged

No matter what's in the reference, it cannot be:

- misleading
- inaccurate
- discriminatory

For example, if a reference said you were [investigated](#) for stealing at work, but the investigation found you did not steal, this could be misleading.

How to challenge a reference

If you suspect a reference was not fair or accurate, or led to discrimination, you can try to challenge the reference.

Speak to the new employer

You can try to speak directly with the person hiring you.

It may help to:

- ask about their concerns with your reference
- address their concerns – for example, show evidence if your reference was misleading or inaccurate
- offer to get other references
- discuss having a probationary period

See a copy of your reference

If you want to check what was in your reference, you can ask either:

- the person who gave the reference
- the person who received the reference

It's a good idea to make the request in writing.

Under data protection law, you might not be able to see your reference if the employer provided it with the agreement that it stays confidential.

For more on data protection law and your rights, see the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\) website](#).

Options for taking legal action

If you are not able to resolve an issue with a reference, it might be possible to do one of the following:

- make a claim to an employment tribunal
- make a different type of court claim (a county court claim)

Making an employment tribunal claim

If you think an employer has [discriminated against you](#) in a reference, you have the option to [make an employment tribunal claim](#).

You usually need to start a claim within 3 months of the date the discrimination happened.

Making a different court claim

You might be able to take an employer to a county court if their reference was misleading or inaccurate and led to you 'suffering a loss'.

For example, if your job offer was withdrawn as a result of the reference.

If you want to make a county court claim, first you might want to [get legal advice](#) on your situation to understand what will be involved.

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