Personnel officer to Robin the Boy Wonder: "Do you have any references besides Batman?"[1]

The final (but still important) job application piece

by Janice K. Christopher

Job application materials must be accurate, current, and relevant. Applicants often devote their time to letter and résumé, however, and fail to consider their list of references, a potentially dangerous omission. Good references can boost your chances; bad references can fatally injure your candidacy.

Good references

• **Current supervisor.** He or she knows your skills, most recent work history, and professional potential. If you don't want this person to know you're job-hunting, indicate that you wish to be contacted before he or she is called; address the issue then. If your relationship with your current supervisor is spectacularly bad, you may hope to omit him or her, but missing supervisors look suspicious. List your supervisor plus references for damage control, such as previous supervisors or senior colleagues who can say, "It's unfortunate [supervisor] doesn't work well with [applicant]. In my relationship with [applicant], I've found him or her to be a valuable asset. . . ."

• **Professional (library) colleagues.** These colleagues can address your knowledge, accomplishments, interpersonal skills, writing/speaking ability, or general collegiality.

• **Non-library references.** Employers outside the library world, professors or researchers, or university administrators may not speak "librarian," but they can assess you as an employee or provide external perspectives.

Bad references

• **Dead people.** Do not provide a reference who is deceased, regardless of name recognition. Search committees like to *speak* to references.

• **Blood relatives and in-laws.** Your mother approves of you automatically. Your brother-in-law wants you hired so you'll move out of his basement and quit drinking his beer.

• **Friends, neighbors, and former teachers.** These folks don't know you in a work context. Co-workers who are friends can be references, but they should be comfortable describing you solely in professional terms.

• **Subordinates.** You could retaliate against them, so any reference is tinged with

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coercion. Is this person being nice just because you're the boss?

Newbie librarian issues

Librarians fresh out of school may have limited library experience and need to go outside the field for references. Remember: Almost any employer can address organizational ability, work ethic, initiative, independence, teamwork, and so on. Search committees know that this person will describe you as a worker or colleague, not as a librarian.

• **Library school professors.** Professors encounter many students; those who speak vaguely about you are bad references. The best references come from professors you worked for as a teaching assistant or research assistant; they are your "employers." Thesis advisors or independent study directors are also good references. Don't list a "name" professor trying for extra cachet if you don't have a close relationship with that person.

• **Reference letters.** These letters are often suggested for placement files. If you're "carpet bombing," applying for many positions, these types of letters make sense because then your references won't be bothered as often (so you hope). If you're selectively targeting potential employers—by geography, position or library type, or for maximum attention to each application—the placement file letter is weak, because it can't address each job's requirements. If a letter emphasizes your teamwork skills but a potential employer is interested in independent work, this letter doesn't help.

Dealing with references

Always ask potential references for permission *before* you send out an application. Why? 1) It's polite. 2) You're asking to be endorsed professionally, so be sure you can and will be (given levels of hiring-related litigation). 3) You don't want the first comment out of the reference's mouth to be, "*He/she* is applying for that?" 4) Professional or personal commitments may limit a reference's availability. Nasty surprises (a previous supervisor taking a six-week "nature hike" in central Alaska) can be avoided. If a person declines, thank them and move on.

When formatting your list, include your name (you'd be surprised how many people forget this). For each reference, provide the form of address (Mr., Ms., Dr.); title ("Director of Libraries," "Head of Technical Services"); and office address and phone number. Summarize each person's relationship to you: "Ms. Doe is my current supervisor" or "Mr. Doe is a senior reference librarian, my co-worker and mentor."

Listing only one reference, even a superhero—Batman—isn't smart. Sure, you work with Batman, drive the Batmobile, and hang out in the Batcave, but can you work with a group? During daylight? Or as a leader instead of a sidekick?

Give your references the job ad, your résumé, letter of application, list of references, and any information about what should be emphasized, such as your planning or public-contact skills. If you're eliminated from consideration for a job, tell your references.

A word to the wise

Listing only one reference, even a superhero—Batman—isn't smart. Sure, you work with Batman, drive the Batmobile, and hang out in the Batcave, but can you work with a group? During daylight? Or as a leader instead of a sidekick? Even if you're self employed, you *do* have professional contacts.

Most ads request three professional references; providing more depends on the job. For general reference or cataloging jobs, three references are enough, but if subject expertise, research skills beyond normal expectations, or highly specialized experience is required, an extra reference or two can address that aspect of your abilities. Always adjust your list for the job.

Some committees cold-call people who are not on your list. If Person A on the committee knows Person B, a former colleague of yours, Person B may get called. Really rude? No; consider the time and effort search committees put in. They want to find an acceptable hire, so they need to gather as much

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to think in straight lines, but are often most productive when we deal in analogy and metaphor. Creative leaps happen after we have steeped ourselves in a problem and given up on horizontal thinking. Our unconscious mind keeps on working and sometimes finds a solution in the patterns produced by something far removed from the original problem.

Maybe a horticulturist will be mulling over an asparagus disease, and a book on polkas will provide the insight she needs: "Let's lay out the beds ONE-two-three-four, ONE-two-three-four." Realms of discourse and thought interpenetrate, and ideas that arose in mathematics are applied to botany, physics, economics, medicine, and French literature; eventually, a particularly knotty problem in topology is called something like "Baudelaire's conundrum."

It is time we give chance its due. From now on, libraries should refuse to accept delivery on a new automation system unless the OPAC interface includes a button that says "RANDOMIZE," or maybe "POTLUCK." Click on this button and you get ten titles from the database—any ten titles, chosen by a random number generator. You may look at these titles for divine guidance. Or just for fresh ideas.

Creative writing teachers may assign students to write papers that cite any seven of *Morphology of Vascular Plants, Lower Groups (Psilophytales to Filicales); National Party Platforms, 1840–1972; Great Riding Schools of the World; Methods of Interpreting Plato and his Dialogues; Nutrition and Diet Therapy; Field Guide to the Butterflies of Africa; Emily Dickinson: an Interpretive Biography; Lumbrosacral Spine: Emphasizing Conservative Management; Readings in British Monetary Economics; and Delineating Toxic Areas by Canine Olfaction.*

There's a report guaranteed not to be available from any online term paper mill. What instructor wouldn't be willing to pay money to grade a paper like that? Or to see the movie based on it?

When an undergraduate comes in saying that he or she can't think of a good term paper topic, we could give "POTLUCK" a spin and offer a real choice. When an undergraduate is making career decisions, he or she could RANDOMIZE and ask "Which of these ten books represents something I wouldn't mind spending the next four or five years learning about?"

But the real benefit would be in broadening the boxes in which we think. In times of change, we look at things that seem to be beyond our control and understanding. By imposing our own order on them, we create the new. We open the Bible and stab our finger at a verse, or toss yarrow stalks, or deal from the devil's deck, and the resulting pattern tells us what we already knew, but didn't want to admit.

A random word, a book seen by chance, can break us out of our mold. Little things can lead to far-reaching consequences. Somewhere a butterfly, dreaming that it is Chuang Chou, flutters its wings and starts a distant hurricane. ■

("Personnel officer to Robin . . ." cont. from page 729)

legitimate information as they can. This practice isn't widespread, but don't be surprised if it happens.

"Character references" don't exist. You're not a Victorian housemaid or footman who needs a "character" to prove moral rectitude. Your references are professional, period.

Conclusion

When composing a list of references, use common sense. Choose professional or work-related contacts who best present your qualifications for a job. Ask your references for their permission before sending out application materials, and inform them about the job and the progress of your application. Many applicants neglect this aspect of job-hunting; paying attention to it can only help you.

Note

1. Mort Gerberg, Cartoon, *The New Yorker,* (July 1997). ■