

Reference Guide – SPPH MSc and PhD programs

This guide is intended to provide more information about expectations for reference letters for both persons writing reference letters for applicants to the SPPH MSc and PhD programs (pages 1-2) and applicants to the SPPH MSc and PhD programs (page 3-4).

Reference Guide

Online reference system:

SPPH and UBC use an online reference system that is connected to the application system. Applicants enter the contact information for their references, and the online system send emails with further instructions on how to complete the reference. Email addresses are required contact information. We strongly suggest that you provide an institutional email address for the applicant to use, and not a personal email address.

- Institutional email addresses are those associated with a university, company, or government (these emails often end like this: @ubc.ca, @princeton.edu, @google.com, etc.).
- Personal email addresses are those associated with free email accounts (Gmail, Hotmail, Yahoo, etc.).

After the applicant has submitted the application and paid the application fee, you will receive an automated email with instructions on how to complete the reference. Please check your junk or spam folders if you expect to receive an email and do not receive one. Sometimes the automated message is mis-directed. Please contact the applicant if you did not receive the automated email. They should check that your email address is correct and they should contact the program if there are any challenges.

The online reference system will recognize your email as an institutional email or a personal email.

- For institutional emails, you will receive instructions about how to upload your reference document in the online system. When you click on the link, you are automatically directed to a short online form. You can choose to fill out this form briefly and also upload a letter. You can also choose to fill out the form with very detailed answers and not upload a letter. You can also choose to not fill out the form and just upload a letter. All three of these options are acceptable.
- For personal emails, you will receive instructions on how to mail a physical letter or form to the SPPH office. Either a letter or a form is acceptable. SPPH does not have a preference.

The online system will also note the due date of the reference in the email.

How the Admissions Committee uses references:

The Admissions Committee reviews each application as a whole, considering the application, transcripts, reference letters, CV, and the letter of intent. Each application is evaluated across three main areas – academic excellence, research potential, and leadership abilities. The Committee appreciates comments on the applicant’s preparedness for an academically rigorous graduate program. Reference letters help the Committee gain insight on the potential for applicants to be successful at SPPH.

Advice for References:

1. The Admissions Committee expects that most reference letters will be one or two pages long. If using the form instead of a letter, the Committee expects answers of five to six sentences for each free text question.
2. Please inform the Committee of how you know the applicant, and to provide some brief context for your interactions with the applicant (e.g. you taught the applicant in a course, you supervised the applicant for a research project, etc.).
3. Please be specific. It is very helpful if you are able to provide concrete examples of the applicant's performance from your interactions with them in the classroom, in a lab, or in other settings.
4. References can also provide valuable insight and context for the Admissions Committee about academic and research settings from outside of Canada and the USA. Brief comments on the educational systems and expectations for excellence can help the Committee understand the achievements of applicants compared to their peers in the same settings.
5. We encourage applicants to share their CVs and letters of intent with references. The Admissions Committee appreciates if the reference can provide some connections to the applicant CV or the applicant letter of intent. Please state if you have read the applicant's CV and/or letter of intent.
6. The Admissions Committee values comments about the applicant's specific research skills and demonstrated leadership abilities.
7. Please include your perspective on the applicant's fit with SPPH. This might include comments on why the applicant's research is population and public health research, the common interests of the applicant and their proposed supervisor, or how studying at SPPH will help the applicant achieve their research goals.
8. If the applicant has not previously held academic research roles or has not previously been involved in population and public health research, please provide comments on why the applicant would benefit from a change in focus. This information helps the Committee to understand why applicants are making changes to focus on population and public health research. Some examples of changes might be: shifting from a role as a health professional or clinician to a role as a researcher, or moving from research in a different discipline to research in population and public health.
9. Letters for applicants to the PhD program should focus more on research potential and comments on why an applicant would be successful in a PhD program. The Committee appreciates examples of an applicant's past research successes.

Applicant Guide

Number of References and Reference Types:

The MSc and PhD applications require three references. Additional references are not allowed.

The application requires you to list references as either “Academic” or “Professional”.

- Academic references are those people that you have interacted with primarily in academic settings. For example, professors of courses you took, thesis supervisors, etc.
- Professional references are those people that you have interacted with primarily in professional settings. For example, your supervisor at work, or an employee of an organization where you volunteered.
- If you worked as a research assistant for a faculty member, even if you never took a class with that faculty member, you can often list that reference as an academic reference.

The Admissions Committee prefers at least one academic reference, and two academic references if possible. However, the Committee understands that there might be some circumstances in which this is not possible. Applicants are encouraged to contact the program if they plan to request three professional references.

References can submit either a reference letter (most common), or a reference form. Either or both is acceptable.

Online reference system:

SPPH and UBC use an online reference system that is connected to the application system. You are required to provide an email address for each reference. We strongly suggest that you use institutional email addresses for all of your references if possible.

- Institutional email addresses are those associated with a university, company, or government (these emails often end like this: @ubc.ca, @princeton.edu, @google.com, etc.). If the reference has an institutional email address their email will be automatically validated and they will receive instructions about how to upload their reference to the online system.
- If the reference does not have an institutional email address (Gmail, Hotmail, yahoo, etc.), then they will receive an email with instructions for mailing a physical letter to the SPPH offices.

Emails with specific instructions for your references are only sent **after** you have submitted the application and paid the application fee. We strongly encourage you to submit your application early.

You can send a reminder to your references via the online system after you have submitted an application. Simply login to the portal and navigate to your application.

The online reference system automatically sends you a notification when your reference has been submitted. You can also check the status in the application portal. Please note that it takes much longer for our office to process paper references. We ask for your patience. You will receive an email when our office has confirmed your paper reference.

If your reference is using the online system, they will automatically be directed to a short online form. They can choose to fill out this form briefly and also upload a letter. They can also choose to fill out the form with very detailed answers and not upload a letter. They could also choose to not fill out the form and just upload a letter. All three of these options are acceptable.

Additional Tips for Applicants:

1. Read the guide for References (pages 1-2)
2. Choosing your references
 - a. It is more important to ask for a reference letter from a professor who knows you well than from a professor that does not know you well, but you got an A+ in their class.
 - b. As a courtesy, please give your references plenty of time to complete their letters. We recommend that you ask your references if they are able to write you a letter before submitting their information in the online application portal.
 - c. We would also recommend sharing your letter of intent and CV with your references.
3. It's okay to ask your reference to write about certain items
 - a. Help your reference by providing reminders (a class you took with them, a project you did really well on).
 - b. You can ask your reference to give additional context for grading systems, awards, or other achievements. For example, the grading system in your home country might be very different, and your reference might be able to provide additional context on how well you have done in comparison to your peers. Or, your reference might be able to provide some additional information about a recognition that you received that is special or significant.
4. Try to ask a good mix of references
 - a. It's okay to have multiple references from the same lab, but you might consider asking them to focus on two different aspects of your work. For example, one can write about how you were great on a project, and the other could focus on your leadership skills in the lab. The Admissions Committee does not want to read two very similar letters from two of your references.
 - b. It is helpful to provide several different perspectives for the Admissions Committee. You can try to provide these perspectives by asking a mix of references to provide letters for you. For example, you could ask your undergraduate thesis supervisor, a professor you had for several courses, and your supervisor at your job to write reference letters.