

Basic Principles of Good Report Writing

(Adapted from NEO, *Principles of Investigation*, Bureau of Quality Assurance, March 2000 and Esrael 2005)

Accuracy

- Report factual information – e.g., “I saw.”
- Report information gained from the *physical senses* – e.g., sight, smell, taste, auditory, and touch.
- Be aware of feelings that may destroy objective descriptions. Strong feelings can cause the writer to seek evidence to support her feelings and reject evidence that does not support them.
- Make distinctions between fact and hearsay, fact and opinion, and fact and conclusions.
- Be clear about the meaning of words; avoid jargon.
- Clarify all abbreviations, such as SOB for shortness of breath.
- Proofread the report and rewrite as needed.

FACT vs. HEARSAY

- A *fact* is information learned through the use of the investigator’s own senses or corroborated by information the investigation obtains.
- Statements from other persons, even witnesses, are *hearsay*.
- Hearsay is generally admissible in administrative hearings and should *not* be ignored. Corroborate hearsay if possible.

FACT vs. CONCLUSION

- A fact proves itself while a conclusion requires collaborative evidence.
- A fact exists independently of the observer, while a conclusion exists only in the mind of the observer.
- A fact is observable, while a conclusion is reasoned.
- A conclusion involves drawing an inference that looks like the logical consequence of preceding presuppositions, information, or evidence.

FACT vs. OPINION

- Fact has the quality of being independent and can be confirmed or substantiated.
- Opinion is an idea, an impression, or a notion resulting from a personal sentiment.
- Opinions are not a part of the main body of a report.

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Completeness

- Completeness is achieved by reporting *all* the facts discovered during the course of an investigation.
- When in doubt, include the information. Information that appears irrelevant to the investigator may be relevant to the reviewer.
- In most cases, the only information the reader will have will be the information in the report.
- Partially stated facts can be misleading and misinterpreted.
- Explain why certain information is lacking or incomplete.
- Provide a detailed explanation of the possible source of additional information and undeveloped leads.

Conciseness

- Avoid unrelated, extraneous, incidental, and nonessential information and detail.
- Pay attention to grammar.
- Avoid adjectives, wit, sarcasm, flowery expressions, and repetition. A report is not a literary or creative writing exercise.
- Use singleness of thought and purpose. A good report will give the reader a clear idea or picture of the investigation.
- Use headings, paragraphing, sentence structure, indentations, underlining, and capitalization to emphasize and give weight and/or visibility to information the investigator deems more important.

Impartiality/Objectivity

- The investigator is a fact finder. Report the material and evidentiary facts without addition or subtraction.
- Do not conceal or withhold information.
- Do not assume.
- Do not conclude.
- Maintain an unbiased and open mind about the case.

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- Avoid formulating preconceived ideas about the guilt of the accused.
- Avoid becoming emotionally involved in the process of seeking information.

Clarity and Report Formatting

- Arrange the contents of the report in discrete sections to facilitate the reader's review and understanding of the report.
- Write in chronological order.
- Avoid ambiguous sentences and vague statements.
- Additional parts of the complete report may include the title page, information on undeveloped leads, investigator's conclusions, witness list, and exhibit/evidence list.