
EFFECTIVE DOCUMENTATION PRINCIPLES

GENERAL DOCUMENTATION PRINCIPLES

1) REALIZE ALL DOCUMENTATION IS POTENTIAL EVIDENCE IN A COURT OF LAW

- All comments, terms, and implicit assumptions will be thoroughly scrutinized.
- Be careful that what you document will be reviewed without the benefit of the same context you were in at the time the documentation was made.
- Accuracy, objective evidence, and integrity are vital.
- “Are you lying now or were you lying then?”

2) TIMELINESS IMPROVES ACCURACY

- Perform all documentation at the time the event occurs.
- As time passes, the quality, validity, and credibility of the documentation decrease quickly.

3) ALWAYS INCLUDE THE DATE

- Precision regarding the event’s date, time, and duration are critical to successful documentation.
- Put the date on the document to ensure honesty, accuracy, and effectiveness.

4) NEVER CHANGE THE DATE

- Modifying a date is fraud; it undermines integrity and destroys the intent of the documentation.
- If necessary, document at a later time; just never lie about the event dates.

5) BE COMPLETE

- Write down as much useful information as necessary to summarize an event accurately.
- Being thorough now will help jog your memory later when you need it to be reminded.

6) AVOID INDIRECT REFERENCES

- When documenting, do not provide unsubstantiated claims. For example:
 - “This is the third time the machine has been broken.” (When were the other two incidents?)
 - “John is sick again today.” (What other days was John sick?)

7) BE CLEAR

- Be factual, avoiding editorializing.
- Focus on who, what, when, where, and how.
- Avoid speculating on “why” something happened.
- Do not use extreme language (e.g., “John was in a lot of pain” vs. “John was in pain.”)

8) DON’T MAKE INAPPROPRIATE CONCLUSIONS

- Simply report the observable facts, while avoiding arbitrary conclusion.
- For example, “Based upon those actions, it is obvious she has issues with minorities.”

9) PROOFREAD ALL DOCUMENTATION

- All initial documentation should be reviewed against various criteria.
- Before finalizing documentation, sanitize it to avoid future complications and regrets.
 - Personal comments, slang terminology, and emotional overtones should be eliminated.

10) AVOID USING ABSOLUTE EXPRESSIONS

- Do not use words like: “always,” “never,” “every,” “all,” etc.
- Tempered, verifiable expressions are better: “frequently,” “seldom,” “rarely,” etc.
- For example:
 - “You are always late.” “Actually, I was on time today.”
 - “You never volunteer to stay late.” “Yes, I did on March 2.”

EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE DOCUMENTATION

11) CLARIFY PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS

- Ensure employees know their exact business goal and related performance expectations.
- Specify the outcome, goal, process, or behavior they must achieve, demonstrate, or attain.
- Make sure performance expectations align with the employee's job description, departmental goals, company standards, policies and procedures, employee handbook content, etc.

12) FOCUS ONLY ON BEHAVIOR

- Attention must only be directed onto specified behavior, not the employee as a person.
- For example, documentation stating that the employee is "on drugs" is inappropriate.
- Rather, state the employee "spoke very quickly," "was fidgeting," and "had dilated pupils."

13) CAPTURE EMPLOYEE COMMENTS

- During a performance feedback session, capture the employee's comments verbatim.
- These quotations are powerful evidence regarding the employee's actions, involvement, and accountability.
- These comments may yield false premises that must be corrected to improve performance.
- Always have a witness present.

14) DEVELOP A PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

- Specify the desired and sustained outcome, roles and responsibilities of the employee and supervisor, expected process, necessary resources, follow-up, and a timeframe.
- Confirm that all attendees understand the plan and agree to its terms before leaving the meeting.

15) OUTLINE POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES

- There are typically three options available at the end of a performance feedback session:
 - Performance improves to the desired expectation and is maintained to that standard.
 - Performance does not improve thereby leading to more serious corrective action.
 - Employee may choose to leave the company.

16) BE MINDFUL OF POTENTIAL HUMAN RESOURCES ISSUES

- Remain cognizant of eventual claims of wrongful termination, discrimination, disability, etc.
- Consult with Human Resources to review, approve, and store documentation.

17) GET THE EMPLOYEE TO SIGN THE PERFORMANCE DOCUMENTATION

- This step is critical to effective documentation.
- By signing the form, the employee acknowledges its occurrence.
- If an employee refuses to sign the form, have the witness document the refusal, and immediately inform human resources of the issue to document the employee's non-compliance; send a follow-up e-mail to the employee.

18) KEEP A PERFORMANCE DOCUMENTATION FILE IN WORD FORMAT ON EACH DIRECT REPORT

- Spend at least 10-15 minutes updating that file each week.
- This becomes the basis of a bullet-proof performance appraisal process.

19) TRACK POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE BEHAVIORS

- Be fair. Nobody only does bad things.
- This is not a game of "gotcha." It is about improving employee performance.
- Positive and negative feedback each can improve an employee's performance.

20) REMAIN CONSISTENT WITH COMPANY POLICIES

- For example:
 - Performance Management not Progressive Discipline
 - Grievance Process
 - Anti-retaliation
 - Anti-discrimination