

Appendix A

PROFESSIONAL WRITING AND DOCUMENTATION GUIDELINES

Agencies will generally provide the social worker with the forms and standards of documentation practice used by their particular organization. However, here are some general guidelines that have application across practice settings.

The Importance of Strong Writing Skills

1. Service documentation—*if it's not written down, it didn't happen*. Fill out every line and space; even if it is not applicable, simply write "NA." By doing so, you have communicated something important.
2. Accreditation and accountability—poorly written records may impede accreditation or funding reimbursement for your agency and therefore can be a direct disservice to the clients you serve.
3. Best practice—professional standards are not optional or subjective but are instead prescriptive and based on empirical evidence. Agency auditors will conduct periodic quality assurance reviews to make sure that all documentation is done correctly.
4. Credibility—people may forget what you say, but your written word will live on for as long as the file remains. This can be beneficial to you and the client when seeking clarity around any issue in dispute and provide concrete evidence in court cases where your records may be subpoenaed.
5. Adherence to professional ethics and standards—your writing is a reflection on your school, your supervisor, your agency, and your profession. Know your agency's procedures and guidelines regarding documentation.
6. Faulty memory—it is impossible to remember all elements from all your cases. For example, multiply 40 cases times an average of four family members times weekly visits.
7. Insurance against future problems—good records verify that you have provided a standard level of care and have fulfilled your professional responsibilities and can be used to defend you in case of a lawsuit or dispute. The file is a legal and permanent document for adoptions, verification for disability benefits, TANF, and so on. Use extreme caution if keeping "personal notes" separate from the "official record." Even a social worker's personal notes can be subpoenaed in a court hearing. Whatever is written down can end up in court under scrutiny from the judge and multiple attorneys.
8. Documents build on each other chronologically—one poorly written report can create ripple effects on future documentation and case activities. Documentation should be done in logical progression.