

## HANDY-DANDY GUIDE TO WRITING REPORTS

First of all, it's important to say that "report" is a loose term. That is, there is no established format for a report--they can take the form of memos, letters, "papers," and so on. There's no established length for a report--they can range from very short to very long. Finally, there is not one purpose for writing a report. Some reports only document "what happened"--like an incident report. Others require the writer to define a problem, examine the causes of it, and propose solutions to it. And so on. Nevertheless, there are a few things to keep in mind when writing a report. They include:

- 1. A title.** It's important to indicate what the report is about in the title. The title can be as simple as "Incident Report," preprinted on the top of a form, or as complex as "Strategic Report for the XYZ Agency: 2003-2008."
- 2. A heading.** Usually the heading should indicate the date the report was written or submitted, the name of the author(s), and the name of the recipient.
- 3. A purpose.** Before you write a report, it's important to have a clear sense of purpose. Do you want to document problematic behavior, in case disciplinary action is required down the line? Do you want to demonstrate that you've used grant monies appropriately? Do you want to suggest a solution to a problem? Once your purpose is clear in your own mind, devise ways to convey it to your audience, especially if the purpose might not be obvious. (The purpose of an "incident report" written on a pre-printed form developed by your agency is pretty clear; the purpose of writing a report on why enrollment in a given program has been falling might not be so obvious.) For instance, you might devise headings like "statement of problem"; "causes of problem"; "suggested solutions to problem."
- 4. An audience.** Keep your audiences in mind when you write your report--both your intended audiences (your boss, for example) and other potential audiences (a jury, should your progress notes be subpoenaed for a court case, for instance). Think about both what you need to say and what you should not say in your report (because of the possible ramifications of having a potential audience read it).
- 5. Paragraphs.** Yes--it's important to write well, even when doing a report. Remember to paragraph; remember to use topic sentences in each paragraph; remember to develop or explain those topic sentences in the rest of the paragraph.
- 6. Proofreading.** Pretty much every report is read by someone, and usually that "someone" is "above" you in the organizational hierarchy. In addition, reports go "on file"; they're "around" for a long time. Therefore, it's really important to proofread them carefully.