



COMMUNICATION THROUGH WRITING

Handouts

Child Advocate Program of Pierce County

SAYING IT DIFFERENTLY

Painting a picture: The following statements which could be found in a court report, lack objectivity. Discuss with a partner how you might make the statements more objective. Use the space provided to take notes or write revised statement.

Instead of writing, "The mother/child visit went well," you could tell the court ...

Instead of writing, "Dad was acting angry and irrational with Tony

CORRECTING A COURT REPORT

Identify at least five things that could be corrected in this court report excerpt and circle them. Discuss with a partner how you might edit this excerpt. Use the space provided to take notes or re-write the report.

CHILD:

Kenna Lewis has been in foster care since February 5, 2019. She seems really happy there. On my most recent visit, her foster mother said that Kenna enjoys finger painting. This seems to be a wonderful foster home and the foster parents want to adopt Kenna. They have another child also.

MOTHER:

Mrs. Lewis has not done anything. When I met Mom, she kept talking about herself. I've never met a person so preoccupied with her own needs. She was confused about why her child came into foster care but says she loves and misses her. She says she tries to get visits but can't always make it because of the bus schedule. She doesn't drive. She said that the services in the court order are too hard to do all at once and that is why she hasn't done anything. She has some major hurdles to overcome if she wants to get her daughter back.

Court Ordered Services	Update
Abstain from alcohol and illegal substance Random UAs Complete D/A assessment and follow recs	Mom failed to attend her recommended treatment or UAs.
Mental Health Counseling	Mom failed to attend her counseling.
Compliance: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Reserved	Progress: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Reserved

Example of how the above might be re-written ON NEXT PAGE

Corrected- Just an example

CHILD:

Kenna Lewis, age 3, has been in foster care for 12 months. When I observe Kenna in the foster home, she usually has a smile on her face while she runs around playing with her toys. On my most recent visit she excitedly showed me her new art supplies, and her foster mother said she really enjoys finger painting. Her needs are being met in her foster home.

MOTHER:

This advocate has been able to have at least monthly contact with Mrs. Lewis. Unfortunately, during this review period Mrs. Lewis has not been attending her court ordered services. Mrs. Lewis told this Advocate that the services she is court ordered to do are too hard to do all at once.

My most recent contact with Ms. Lewis was on February 20, 2020. At that time, Ms. Lewis talked about her current situation and how she was unable to make visits because she didn't drive and had to rely on the bus, which did not always match the visit schedule. Ms. Lewis also indicated that she is homeless and spends much of her time figuring out where she will sleep that night. She indicated this impacted her ability to get to services. While Ms. Lewis may not be compliant with the court ordered services, she wanted to make sure that this Advocate knew that she loved her daughter very much.

Court Ordered Services	Update
Abstain from alcohol and illegal substance Random UAs Substance Use Disorder Treatment	The social worker reports that she referred UAs but that mom has not followed through. Mom reports to this advocate that she has not been able to make it to UAs or treatment as she finds all the services overwhelming and she struggling to get to where she needs to be.
Mental Health Counseling	The social worker reports she has given mom the information regarding where she can get counseling at three different places, and that mom needs to call to initiate an appointment. As with her other services, mom reports she is to overwhelmed to follow through.
Compliance: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Partial <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Reserved	Progress: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Reserved

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL COURT REPORT WRITING

Your court report is a powerful document that will forever be a part of your case. Upon reading your report the judge should have a good picture of the current situation, accurate information on the child's current status and a clear understanding of your recommendations. You want your report to be objective but persuasive. Below are some tips that will help you write a great court report.

- Give yourself **plenty of time** to write your report and don't wait until the last minute.
- Keep your report **fact-based, child focused, and family centered.**
- Be **familiar** with the **format** of your report, it is likely a formatted report will be given to you by your program. Follow that format!
- Know your audience. **You are writing for the judge;** however the other parties will also be reading your report. Write as if the judge knows nothing about the case.
- **Be accurate.** If you quote someone, make sure that the quote is accurate in word and citation. Cite where you are getting information. For example, "The mother reported..."
- Report **objectively** and **factually.** If you are writing about something that is intangible, like someone's emotions, attitude or behavior, use words like "seems" or "appears", however try to limit these conclusions unless absolutely necessary.
- Write in an **active voice.** For example: The mother did begin her drug and alcohol treatment (passive) v. The mother began her drug and alcohol treatment (active).
- **Be consistent** in how you address yourself, whether it is in the first person (I) or third person (this Advocate).
- Be **clear and concise.** State facts and identify your sources. Avoid using technical jargon and abbreviations.
- **Refrain from making personal judgments.** For example: If the mother really loved her kids she would be participating in the services.
- Find something **positive** to say about the parents.
- **Refrain from gushing** about the foster/relative placement. Merely address whether or not the child's needs are being met and whether or not you have any concerns.
- Don't use your report as a way to deliver important information for the first time. You should be communicating with the parties throughout the review period. What is ultimately in your report **should not be a surprise** to the other parties.
- **Edit and Proofread!** Check your spelling (including people's names), grammar and punctuation.
- **Make a case** in the body of your report that **supports your recommendations.**
- **Include a picture** of the child(ren) on or with your report.
- **Communicate with your supervisor** if you have writers block or are having issues with getting your report done. Do this in a timely manner.

EMAIL WRITING TIPS

THINK ABOUT YOUR MESSAGE BEFORE YOU WRITE IT

- **Be Kind. Don't Flame:** If you find yourself writing an email while angry or upset, save a draft and walk away. Give yourself a period of time (minutes/hours/days) to reflect on what message your email is sending. If you are not sure send it to your supervisor for feedback.
- **Know your audience:** Who is included in your email? There is nothing worse than hitting "Reply All" or inputting the wrong email address and then hitting "Send." Our cases are confidential and as the Advocate you are limited on who you can share information with. When you are a part of a mass email chain, make sure you know who ALL the recipients are, and that they are entitled to the information you are going to provide, before you hit send.
- **Don't assume privacy:** YOUR EMAILS ARE NOT PRIVATE, not even the ones to your supervisor. Your emails to the social worker become a part of their record and may be produced in discovery. They can also be requested by other parties through the discovery process. You can't control where your email goes after you hit send.

BE CLEAR AND CONCISE

- **Have a meaningful subject line:** What is included in the subject line of an email will often dictate if and when it gets open. Use this opportunity to persuade the recipient to open your email.
 - Don't leave the subject line blank, include the case/client name and be specific as possible. Example: RE: Frannie Smith (child)- What is the placement contact info?
- **Have context for your email:** Make sure the recipient knows why you are contacting them (keeping in mind confidentiality), especially if it is in reference to a prior email, document or staffing.
- **State a desired outcome in your email:** If you need a response make sure that it is clear, and how you like the response (e.g. email or phone). Let them know if your email is just an FYI email.
- **Identify yourself clearly:** Make sure you conclude your emails with your name and contact information. Consider having a standard email signature that includes this information. When contacting someone for the first time, identify your role.
- **Keep your emails short:** Figure out your main point and then try to keep the email to no more than 5 sentences. Don't ask a laundry list of questions. If emails, are to long, people won't read them.

PROOFREAD BEFORE HITTING SEND

- **Reflect on the tone of your email:** When communicating through writing, your words are not supported by gestures, voice inflections or other cues and it is easy for someone to misread the tone of an email.
 - Don't use ALL CAPS or go **crazy** with **bold**, *italicizing*, and underlining.
 - Remember your emails are professional communications.
- **Edit:** Re-read your emails before sending.
 - Make sure the format of your email is easy to read: Use paragraphs, use bullet points (if appropriate).
Avoid fancy fonts.
 - Use proper grammar, spelling and punctuation. Avoid using "text talk" (e.g. LOL)

EXAMPLES OF EMAILS

From: tczar.advocate@email.com

To: Sallysocialworker@dcyf.gov

CC: mysupervisor@pierecountywa.gov

Subject: Frannie Smith (Child)- Placement information needed

Hi Sally-

Frannie is moving today. Can you please email or call me with the contact information for her new placement, as soon as possible?

Thanks, Tracey

Tracey Czar
Advocate for Frannie Smith
253-555-1234
Tczar.advocate@email.com

From: tczar.advocate@email.com

To: Sallysocialworker@dcyf.gov

CC: mysupervisor@pierecountywa.gov

Subject: George Smith (father)- Who is his individual counselor?

Hi Sally-

I just spoke with Mr. Smith and he reported that you made the referral for his individual counseling. Mr. Smith didn't have the contact information for the counselor, could you email or call me with that information?

Thanks, Tracey

Tracey Czar
Advocate for Frannie Smith

From: tczar.advocate@email.com

To: Sallysocialworker@dcyf.gov

CC: mysupervisor@pierecountywa.gov

Subject: Frannie Smith- How is she doing in your class?

Dear Ms. Teacher

My name is Tracey Czar and I am the Court Appointed Advocate for Frannie Smith, who I understand is in your 2nd grade class. I have attached a copy of my court order to this email, for your records. It is my job to advocate for her best interests in her Dependency case in the Juvenile Court. Part of that responsibility includes me gathering information about her education.

I'd like to talk with you about Frannie and how she is doing in your class. I am available to speak with you by phone, email, or arrange to come to the school for an in person meeting. Please let me know what would work best for you and if there is anything, as it relates to Frannie, that might need my immediate attention. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thanks, Tracey

Tracey Czar
Advocate for Frannie Smith
253-555-1234
Tczar.advocate@email.com