

Non-judgemental Report Writing: Child Protection

A guide to ensuring your report writing is clear, accurate and objective

So you need to write a report?

The following exercises are designed to assist in helping you develop clear, accurate and objective report writing.

First let's look at reasons why you may need to write a report.

For whom?

Reports may be written for a number of different audiences.

Who a report is written for is slightly different to **why** they are written.

WHO?

- Your own service
- Management committees
- Referral agencies
- FACS
- Solicitors
- Police
- Health services
- Families
- Royal Commissions
- Various courts (Children's Court, Family Court, criminal and civil courts)
- Other investigators

WHY?

- Legal responsibility
- Child protection incidents
- Reportable conduct incidents
- Service policy
- Future use in case other concerns arise
- Children's files can be subpoenaed
- A court may ask for information about a child
- Police may ask for written information
- Child protection services may ask for written information

Let's look first at what is best to avoid and then what is best to use

Avoid

Avoid language that includes:

- Excessive use of pronouns e.g. he, she, it, etc. More frequently use the names of people
- 'probably' or 'possibly' - these do not create confidence for the reader

Do not include irrelevant information such as:

- hearsay, information from a third party that is not directly witnessed.
For example: "Harriet stated Jenny told her John had said/done..."
You can write: "Harriet said her mum, Jenny, told her..."
- opinions e.g. "the parent used excessive discipline"
This gives rise to the questions
"What is discipline?"
One person's view of what constitutes discipline may not be the same as someone else's.
"What is excessive?"
Again, what one person thinks is excessive may not be the same as another person.

Avoid 'I believe/I think' statements. Stick with what you do know or have information about.

Family history (unless relevant to the concerns)

- eg. While the parents may be great at volunteering for the service this is unlikely to have any bearing on the concerns raised about them
- It is important to think of WHY you think the particular information is relevant. If the parent has a history of failing to pick up a child from the service, this may be relevant but the fact they have been married four times is likely not.

Personal conclusions about the type of abuse suspected

- eg. X type of people are more likely to neglect their children
- The parents are junkies so it's likely they have done X

Do not use opinionated, prejudiced or exclusive language

- Rather than writing 'men and girls,' write 'men and women.'

Avoid words which appear to exaggerate. It can help if you avoid 'intensifying adverbs' that tend to give this impression:

- For example, "awfully", "very", "really", "always", "never".

The use of these words can make what you are describing appear biased or lacking in judgement.

Avoid generalisations. For example:

- "Children from <name of country or ethnic group> are more upset by this behaviour"
- This also relates to avoiding words which intensify or appear to exaggerate: "John is always upset when his dad comes to pick him up"
- Instead be more informational: "On each occasion John's father has come to pick him up staff have observed that John..."

Avoid evaluative words which are based on non-professional judgements and feelings, such as "badly", "disappointment", "amazing", etc.

Avoid language that implicitly excludes any group of people.

- For example do not presume a doctor, nurse, teacher is male or female unless you know.

Avoid the personal pronoun "I": write more impersonally.

- For example, "I have observed" or "I have been informed" instead of "I think...", "I believe..."
- Stating "I believe..." or "In my opinion..." infers expertise or specialisation you may not have and knowledge you may not possess.
- In addition, adding such personal comments almost seems to emphasise that the writing is just your opinion or interpretation, rather than positions that are supported by the evidence.

Avoid such things as "s/he did not want to,"

- The same goes for "she thought," "he feels," or "they were trying to."
- This form of writing supposes the writer knows the feelings of the person as opposed to what they have expressed.

Do..

Detailing what a person “did” is a good means by which to show your writing is objective rather than subjective.

- If something has actually happened and the writer or speaker is simply relaying that information, they are making simple statements of fact.
- In subjective writing, words are often added to these phrases to make them more than just fact – and in doing so, they become inferences:

To keep your writing objective:

Be specific instead of vague or general.

- Rather than writing ‘everyone says’, give examples of what actually was said and by whom.

Be explicit in expressing yourself.

- For example, “ten” instead of “several”; “70%” instead of “most of the population”; “three years ago” or “in 2006” instead of “some time ago”.

Identify your sources.

Be specific about dates.

Be specific about the other person’s statements.

- Write exactly what they said, rather than your interpretation, even if the person uses incorrect words to express themselves.

Use more moderate and graduated evaluative language, instead of intense or emotional evaluative language.

- For example, instead of writing “Parents who smoke are obviously abusing their children”, write “Research indicates second hand smoke has some harmful effects on children’s health.”

Use modality to show caution about your views, or to allow room for others to disagree.

- For example, instead of writing “Smoking causes cancer and she’s got the kids in the car with her against the law” write:
“I have observed Mrs White picking up her children on four occasions. On each occasion she has been smoking when getting into the car with the children. One of the children, Jane, has been reported to OOSH as having asthma. I understand it is against the law to smoke while a child under 16 years is present in the car.”

Objective language includes phrases such as: “I saw,” or “I counted,” or “I observed.”

You can include ‘subjective evidence’ given to you by the person, as long as you identify the source.

- ‘Subjective evidence’ is evidence that you cannot evaluate— you simply have to accept or reject what the person says.
- Subjective evidence emphasizes personal feelings, thoughts, judgments and opinions.
- For example a child may say they hate someone, or think they’re ‘bad’. They may not explain why they think this.

Things to remember...

When you are making a service record of an event you need to show you have an objective basis for your concerns.

Equally and importantly should you suspect that a child may be at risk of significant harm you also need to show you have an objective basis for your concerns.

Let's have a look at a poorly written report...

John's dad hits him with a belt really often. He did it again last night just because John wouldn't do what his dad said he should do. I think this is very abusive and should be stopped.

John has a bruise on his leg that looks really bad and it's obvious it was caused by his father hitting him with a belt.

John said his dad hits him a lot and his mum doesn't do anything but says 'do what your dad says'. John hates being with his dad because he scares him.

I would say his dad is probably violent at home to his wife and an apprehended violence order should be taken out. We've already called a women's refuge to see if we can get the mother and children into the refuge.

Given the way his dad looks when he comes to get John it seems like he drinks a lot and so he's probably drunk at home and becomes violent.

Before we move on to, see if you can work out which are the parts of the report are not examples of 'best practice'.

Type out this report below, highlighting problem areas..

John's dad hits him with a belt really often. He did it again last night just because John wouldn't do what his dad said he should do. I think this is very abusive and should be stopped.

John has a bruise on his leg that looks really bad and it's obvious it was caused by his father hitting him with a belt.

John said his dad hits him a lot and his mum doesn't do anything but says 'do what your dad says'. John hates being with his dad because he scares him.

I would say his dad is probably violent at home to his wife and an apprehended violence order should be taken out. We've already called a women's refuge to see if we can get the mother and children into the refuge.

Given the way his dad looks when he comes to get John it seems like he drinks a lot and so he's probably drunk at home and becomes violent.

You can type directly into this document in the window below.
Use CAPS for any words or phrases you can identify as problematic.

Now we'll take a look at the problems areas..

John's dad hits him with a belt **really often**. **He did it again** last night just because John wouldn't do what his dad said he should do. **I think** this is **very abusive** and should be stopped.

John has a **bruise on his leg** that **looks really bad** and **it's obvious** it was caused by **his father** hitting him with **a belt**.

John said his dad hits him a lot and his mum doesn't do anything but says 'do what your dad says'. John hates being with his dad because he scares him.

I would say his **dad is probably violent** at home **to his wife** and **an apprehended violence order should be taken out**. We've already called a women's refuge to see if we can get the mother and children into the refuge.

Given the way his dad looks when he comes to get John it **seems like** he drinks **a lot** and so he's **probably** drunk at home and becomes violent.

Did you find them all?

Now let's look at a better example...

John, aged 9 (born 1 January 2006) is a child attending MiniMe OOSH.

At 8AM on 27 February 2015 John arrived at MiniMe OOSH. At approximately 8.10AM I noticed John appeared to be limping slightly.

I asked him if his leg was sore. John turned around, pulled up the leg of his pants and showed me a bruise on the back of his leg.

On observation, the bruise to the back of his left leg is 2 cm below the knee.

The bruise is rectangular in shape, with clearly delineated lines on either side. The bruise angles downwards at approximately 45 degree diagonally from the outside of his leg, just below the rear of his knee, to the inside of his leg.

The bruise also appears to have two small oval shaped marks in the middle.

The bruise is a bluish-purple in colour.

John informed me this happened last night (26 February 2015) not long after he was picked up from OOSH. Service records show John was picked up by his father at 5.30PM.

The family lives a five minute drive from the service.

John said the bruise was caused by the belt his father uses. John stated his father had hit him with the belt before. He can't remember exactly when and the marks didn't last long. This time a bruise has occurred. John stated the bruise is very sore and he can't rest his leg against anything.

John stated his father became angry with him when he said he didn't want to eat his dinner before going to soccer training. John said his mother was home when it happened and was able to see his father hitting him in the living room.

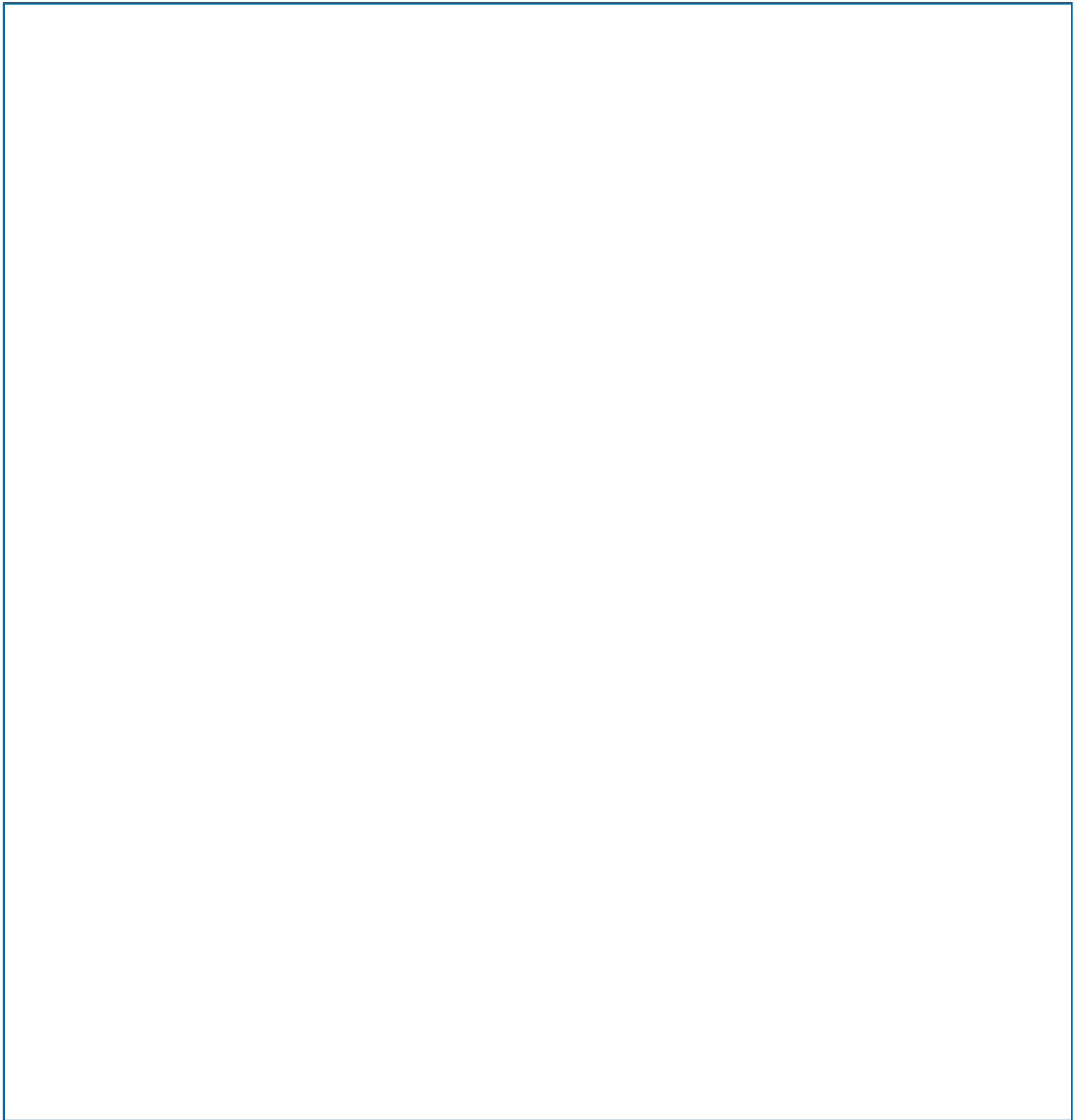
John stated his mother was home on the other occasions too. John stated his mother tells him to 'just do what your dad says.' When I asked, John replied he doesn't know what his mother thinks of his dad's behaviour.

Sometimes his mother will take his dad into the kitchen and then they have an argument.

John said he doesn't like to be home alone with his dad as his dad gets really angry with him and this scares him.

His dad doesn't hit his younger brother or sister with the belt. John said he has seen and heard his parents argue but he's never seen or heard his father hitting his mum.

In the window below list the elements of the report which you think make this a 'good' example:



Some examples:

- The child's date of birth is provided.
- Observations are clearly stated.
- The injury shape, location and colour of the child's injury is clearly described.
- Names are used frequently so the reader knows who has said what to whom.
- A time frame is provided during which it appears the injury occurred.
- A time frame is provided identifying when the disclosure occurred and how
- There are no assumptions. What people do or do not know or think is not presumed.
- Facts are presented clearly.

While a complete report requires more information than that included in the preceding example, I hope this exercise and the information it contains has helped you develop a better understanding of good report writing.

Network also provides an Online Report Form.

The form ensure that all necessary information is included while simultaneously providing advice on good report writing.

The form can be completed online then downloaded and printed.

The template is based in the 'Child Safe' section of the Network website.

I hope you have found this exercise useful and interesting.

Remember: practicing these exercises will help you develop a good, clear approach to writing reports which will eventually become your natural writing style.