

# HOW TO DOCUMENT



Keeping documentation is not only writing down specific details relevant to your situation/case, it also includes retaining important papers, such as any correspondence (memos, letters, e-mails, phone messages) reports, management directives, notes, performance evaluations, copies of your time cards, overtime/vacation/sick leave slips, etc.

Good documentation is extremely important if you are having problems within the workplace. Its importance is primary, not only for non-grievable actions, where you may only need an informal meeting with your supervisor to clear up a minor work problem, but for filing grievances and unfair labor practice charges, should your work situation difficulty escalate. The importance of this paper trail in supporting your case cannot be emphasized strongly enough. Because of problems with security and confidentiality at your workplace (management may inspect your desk, its contents, and computer at any time) it would be worthwhile to secure your documentation file in a safe place, such as your home.

## Some key points to consider in documentation:

### What to document

- Meeting notes (between you and supervisor)
- Verbal exchanges (between you and other significant persons, e.g., supervisor, manager, co-worker)
- Staff meeting notes (who was present, what was said)
- Meaningful incidents--to support your case (e.g., outbursts, observations, consistent work rule infractions by coworkers within your department, though you are the one being singled out and disciplined for the same infractions, or any similar disparate actions).

For instance, after meetings with your supervisor/manager, record, as quickly as you can after the meeting what transpired in the meeting. You may choose to give your supervisor/manager a copy of your meeting minutes, though it is not necessary. If your supervisor verbally tells you something of importance or of relevance, memorialize it. You can do this in an e-mail to your supervisor after the verbal encounter.

### Organize chronologically

In addition to keeping detailed notes and supporting documents, keeping a time-line is also invaluable. If you prefer to keep only a time-line, in lieu of keeping additional detailed notes, be sure to include all details in your time-line. For quick reference and recall, the time-line is extremely beneficial. With more noteworthy incidents, a full description (with date) of what transpired should be placed in your documentation file. To complete your time-line, put events in time sequential order. Begin with the events leading up to the incident (if one exists), follow with the details of the incident itself and continue with post-incident events. Patterns can be clearly demonstrated over an extended time period. For each written specific you mention in your time-line, place a copy of the corresponding document into your documentation file, i.e., if you mention a copy of an e-mail from your supervisor in your time-line, include a copy in your file.

## Document fully

Make sure that you document all relevant circumstances that support your case. You will be surprised to find that what you may have saved in your documentation file, though irrelevant at the time, may become significantly helpful to you later. A rule of thumb to follow: It is better to have more than not enough.

## Use full names in your documentation

Use a person's name, and state his/her title, e.g., Jane Doe, my immediate supervisor. Once you have made this identification, you may subsequently refer to that person by full name only. Avoid using he/she or him/her, as individual references may become vague.

**Vague:** "On June 1, I met with Mary Baker, my department manager, and Alice Morris, my immediate supervisor. She told me that I had an attendance problem." (The last sentence of this example is vague; to whom does she refer? Does \*she\* refer to Mary Baker or Alice Morris?)

**Clear:** "On June 1, I met with Mary Baker, my department manager, and Alice Morris, my immediate supervisor. Mary Baker told me that I had an attendance problem." (This leaves no doubt to the reader as to whom said what.)

## Identify eyewitnesses

When documenting and when pertinent, be sure to note the names of all eyewitnesses to incidents (e.g., verbal exchanges), in case you later need them to support your claims. If the eyewitness is willing and if the incident is particularly important or relevant enough to you, solicit a statement from him/her as soon as possible after the incident. Have the eyewitness briefly state what she/he saw or heard--it does not have to be lengthy. Be sure that her/his account is dated and signed.

## Avoid delay

Document as soon as possible.

The longer you delay, the more your memory will be clouded by post-incident events. Document while your memory is fresh and vivid with details. Oftentimes, if your case goes through the entire grievance process or if an unfair labor practice charge is filed, it may be months before you will be asked questions to substantiate your claims. Your detailed notes will benefit you enormously when you answer.

## Be Objective

Report only the facts and avoid hearsay and subjective opinions. Focus on who, what, where, and when--not why. Try to keep your emotion out of your documentation. Write what happened; do not assign motivation for any behavior. Use direct quotes as necessary. In particularly significant events, be sure to include as many facts as possible.

**Vague:** "Because my supervisor was angry over my tardiness, she yelled at me in the middle of the office."

**Clear:** "When I, Barbara King, arrived ten minutes late (8:10 a.m.) to work on Monday, June 1, 1998, Flora Bush, my supervisor, said in a very loud voice, which was overheard by three staff members (Jane Doe, Alice Walker, and Bill Jones) who were working in adjacent work cubicles to my cubicle, "What is with you and your persistent tardiness?"

Include an organization chart of your work place hierarchy. If you do not have access to an organizational chart, jot down what you know. Include those individuals (management and coworkers) relevant to your specific case. Later when more formal filings are completed, someone unfamiliar with your case will find the chart very helpful in picturing your situation and department's chain-of-command.

### **Be truthful**

Avoid the temptation to manufacture details or events, as it will ultimately lead to inconsistencies later. Presentation of factual material, without emotion, will state your case clearly and intelligently. If your documentation is read later by a neutral party, an objectively-written account will make a substantial and powerful impact.

### **Be persistent**

Even though a difficult work situation may ebb and flow in its intensity, continue your documentation. If a work situation seems to improve, do not become lax in keeping your records. Often, the problem will reappear, a similar one may emerge, or an entirely different problem may develop. Patterns of behavior, mismanagement, discrimination, and hostility are more easily shown over an extended time period. You have nothing to lose except a little time, but in the long run you will have much to gain, when you present your well-supported, objectively-written, and thoroughly documented case in your defense.

Source: CUE