

Recording Case Work

Practice Guide



If you work in health or human services, your job may involve writing case notes, care plans, file notes or reports. These records often document client assessments and needs, client contact and services provided. They may also contain information about client outcomes and achievements. The records you keep are a communication tool. They are often a legal requirement which ensure that you, and the organisation you work for, are accountable. Ultimately, written records assist you to provide an effective and quality service to your clients.

There are three key issues that are important to consider when recording case work:

- Purpose
- Principles
- Protection

Purpose

All records should be written with an intended purpose. To avoid wasting time writing irrelevant or inconsequential information, find out who you are writing for and what the records are intended to achieve. If you understand who your primary audience is, then you can assess the most appropriate way of writing for them. Find out what your normal industry standards are, then ask your team and organisation about their expectations and requirements. Whatever policies and systems you follow, they should be relevant to, and reflect the needs of, the organisation and service of where you work.

Be aware of using jargon, abbreviations or language which could be confusing or misinterpreted by audiences, such as clients or a court, who may need to read them. Taking a thoughtful and planned approach to how you write will make sure that any person reading it will be clear about your intentions and what you have written.

Principles

Your writing style should reflect why you are writing records and what they need to document. Some organisations have a clinical approach, while others in more therapeutic or community settings encourage a narrative style. Cameron & turtle-song (2002) recommend the SOAP Format as a person-centred approach. SOAP stands for: Subjective, Objective, Assessment and Plan. This format can help staff be systematic, yet creative, as they master the skill of recording case work.

Case records provide evidence of the work you do and the support you provide to clients. This evidence is vital information for yourself, your organisation and your team where consistency and collaboration is required. It is also a key part of your organisation's auditing or quality assurance process. Reviewers and assessors may want to see the evidence you have collected and what work you have done. If your organisation is funded by a government department or has to meet certain quality assurance standards, it is vitally important that you collect and record information that demonstrates you are meeting these standards.

Your records should not only reflect your organisation's policies and practices, but also your professional values. You need to have a clear understanding of your responsibility to always care for and protect your clients. Good practice includes a commitment to integrity and honesty, respecting human rights and dignity, and empowering clients to make informed choices. Your records should support these principles and maintain the best interests of clients as a priority, with due regard to the respective interests of others.

The principles of good written communication should also be adhered to. As a general rule, make all records factual, accurate and complete. Ensure they are legible and written clearly. It is good practice to write your records based on facts because facts are less open to interpretation and bias as they are the observed or verifiable details of a situation or event. Opinions are interpretations of a situation or behaviour and they are more subjective and individual. If you are required to write an opinion, or you are using the SOAP Format, make sure that you state clearly what evidence you used to arrive at your conclusions.

Good records and reporting take time and effort. Practice your writing and ask for feedback from colleagues and supervisors to help you improve your written communication skills. Learn to use the correct words, grammar, spelling and punctuation and use helpful resources, like spell-check and a thesaurus, if these help.

Protection

As records are evidence which can be used for legal purposes, you must remember to protect the authenticity of records. To do this, avoid changing, erasing or tampering with records that have already been written. This can raise questions about the notes' accuracy and your honesty. Falsification of records is a crime, so it is much better to be honest, amend mistakes

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appropriately, and once something is considered to be part of the official record, do not discard or destroy it.

Whether you keep your records in a paper file or create and store them electronically, your organisation should develop and monitor policies that state what records people can access and how they should manage confidential data. You need to set up systems to secure all of your records, protecting them from physical or electronic theft or loss. Think about who has access to files and what devices you allow people to connect to your computer network.

Protect your records from getting lost and unorganised by managing your filing system. Confusing and messy records and files are unprofessional and unhelpful. Set up and maintain consistent ways to name files, then manage documents and data. Clear concise notes that are labelled or filed neatly, allow readers to find and understand information quickly and easily, saving time and disagreements. Good practice is to file and record your records chronologically. Use cross references in your notes to other documents and correspondence where appropriate.

Finally, once you have closed a file, you need a good system to store old records. They often need to stay accessible for many years. Find a good place to safely retain your records for the required statutory period and then document how and when they have been destroyed.

Reference

Cameron, S., & turtle-song, i. (2002). Learning to write case notes using the SOAP format. *Journal of Counseling and Development: JCD*, 80(3), 286-293.

Practical tips

- 1 Have a clear and focused structure to your writing.
- 2 Write in the first person and use the active voice.
- 3 Record only essential and relevant details.
- 4 Keep your writing with a focus on the best interests of the client.
- 5 Do not write anything that could harm someone or your organisation.
- 6 Avoid using terms which are ambiguous or open to individual interpretation.
- 7 If you want to quote someone, use quotation marks.
- 8 Sign off your records and clearly write your name on reports.
- 9 Use correct spelling, grammar and punctuation to make your records professional and easy to read.
- 10 Use the 24 hour clock, if you are recording time.
- 11 If you use names in your records, clearly identify who people are, including their role and relationship.
- 12 Be mindful of privacy and confidentiality and protect records from unauthorised access.

REFLECT

Do my case notes communicate what I want to say clearly and accurately?



Do I organise my thoughts and what I want to say before I start writing?

Would my current case notes help or hinder my client's well-being if scrutinised by a court?

What communication skills do I need to improve?