

# Documenting Observations

## Introduction

Good documentation of observations is essential for a successful assessment process.

There are three qualities of good documentation. Good documentation is factual, detailed yet succinct, and clearly matches the PreK indicator identified.

After viewing this section, you will be able to describe:

- the difference between subjective and objective description;
- the appropriate amount of detail to include in documentation; and
- the importance of matching documentation to the essential indicator.



## Facts vs Interpretation

The language used to record anecdotal observations must be factual – record what you see and hear, what the child does and says. Avoid interpretations, judgments and conclusions.

Here are some words and phrases to avoid because they reflect judgment and/or interpretation:

The child loves...  
The child likes...  
She or he enjoys...  
She or he spends a long time at...  
It seems like...  
It appears...  
I felt...  
I wonder...  
She or he does...very well...  
She or he is bad at...  
This is difficult for...

Instead, use words and phrases that convey only the facts, such as:

She or he often chooses...  
I saw her...  
I heard him say...  
She or he spends five minutes doing...  
She or he said...  
Almost every day, he...  
Once or twice a month, she...  
Each time, he...  
She consistently...  
We observed a pattern of...



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## Example

For most of us, avoiding judgmental or subjective language takes lots of practice. Watch this clip. Pay particular attention to Shosha, the girl in the turquoise shirt.

What words in this documentation are interpretive or evaluative? What is the overall tone?

*Shosha seems distracted as she attempts to make the shape of a person with stickers. She has a hard time sharing stickers with others, but she gives helpful advice to the girl next to her.*

The words, *seems distracted*, reflect the judgment or interpretation of the observer. How does the observer know she is distracted?

The words, *hard time* and *helpful*, are also interpretive. What does a *hard time* look like? What effect does the word, *helpful*, have on the tone of the interaction?

If you note only what the child said or did, you will avoid judgment and interpretation.

Notice the objective nature of this example:

*Shosha made a person with stickers. She used a circle and an oval, pointing to each and saying, "Here's the head and here's the belly." A moment later, she removed the oval and stuck a triangle below the circle and said, "I need this for a tiny little shirt."*

This documentation is purely factual and describes only what Shosha did and said, not what the observer thinks about what she did. The tone of this documentation is neutral, neither positive nor negative.



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## Amount of Detail

A good, detailed observation is succinct and to the point. Choose details that will help others picture what the child did and/or said. Two or three sentences may be all that are necessary.

Remember, quantity is seldom a mark of quality in documenting observations.



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## Example

Documenting observations with the right amount of detail takes practice. Some of us share so few details that the event we're describing lacks clarity, and others share so many that the point is lost.

Watch Jaiden and Shawn as they work with shapes. Pay particular attention to Jaiden in the dark blue shirt.

Does this statement capture the scene?

*Jaiden made a box with several magnetized shapes.*

Are you able to picture Jaiden making a box? What additional details might help you visualize what Jaiden is able to do?

Does this statement capture the scene?

*Jaiden made a large box with magnetic blocks, placing them so that they stuck together without falling. Shawn added blocks to the box and Jaiden did not respond to him in any way, continuing to work on his own.*

This documentation provides many more details to convey the nature of Jaiden's engagement in the process of building the box.



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## Matching Indicators

The documentation you choose must clearly match the indicator. It's a good match if others would read the documentation and draw the same conclusion as the observer about the child's progress related to the indicator.



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## Example

Watch this video clip and decide which essential indicator is the best match for the sample documentation that follows.

*Samantha played with three other girls in the sandbox, using a shovel to fill an upside down truck with sand. She conversed with the other girls about "the monster" she saw "in the newspaper" and said, "we've got to solve this mystery, guys." Then she said, "we've got to work together."*

Is it . . .

El 1? - Coordinates eye-hand movements using beads, laces, pegs, puzzles and other manipulatives and small objects and when dressing and undressing.

Or . . .

El 13? - Communicates ideas and/or feelings through creative



activities.

Or. . .

EI 18? - Plays and interacts with various children sharing experiences and ideas with others.

EI 1 is not a good choice because its main focus is small motor skills, rather than communication, which is the main focus of this sample.

EI 13 is not a good choice because its main focus is creative activities like art and music, rather than communication of ideas.

The best answer is EI 18 - Plays and interacts with various children sharing experiences and ideas with others.

The documentation sample records actual quotes to illustrate how Samantha shared her ideas - "a monster in the newspaper;" the need to solve the mystery; the desirability of working together - while playing along side others.