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How to Write Good Case Notes

An Essential Skill for
BIT Members, Counselors
& Case Managers

WITH BRIAN VAN BRUNT, ED.D.

HOW TO WRITE GOOD CASE NOTES: AN ESSENTIAL SKILL FOR BIT MEMBERS, COUNSELORS, AND CASE MANAGERS

INTRODUCTION

Whether you are the designated scribe for your institution's Behavioral Intervention Team, a counselor, or a case manager, you probably understand the importance of documentation. Keeping good case notes helps with effectiveness and efficiency. When dealing with a large case load, having good notes can refresh your memory about specific students, issues, and interventions, so you can pick up right where you left off the last time you met with your BIT or with a student.

But good note-taking is also about providing accountability and transparency — things that will help institutions should their actions or records be called into question. In addition, a focus on accountability and transparency will make it easier for you to secure needed resources from your institution. And it will make it likelier that members of the campus community will see you as a helpful resource and come to you when they are concerned about someone's behavior.

The maintenance of adequate and timely records of service is a professional, ethical, and legal obligation. Yet taking good notes for a BIT or case management is not like any other note-taking you've likely ever done. It's our hope that by showing you the most common pitfalls and providing you some best practices, we can help you improve your note-writing skills, and in turn better the effectiveness and efficiency of your BIT, counseling and case management approach.

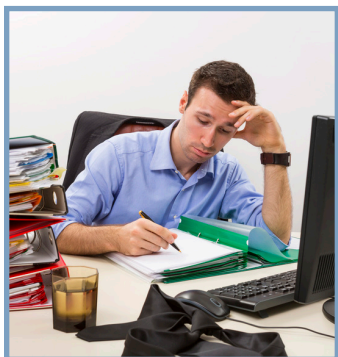


THE EXPERT

Van Brunt serves as the senior executive vice president for professional program development at The NCHERM Group, LLC. He is also a past-president of the American College Counseling Association, president of the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association, and managing editor of *Student Affairs eNews*. He taught at the college level for many years and now focuses on writing, conducting training seminars and conference presentations, and consulting with institutions through NCHERM. He has also trained many case managers, counselors, and BIT members on how to take good notes. In addition, he is the author of *Harm to Others: The Assessment and Treatment of Dangerousness*, and *Ending Campus Violence: New Approaches in Prevention*.

MAJOR DON'TS

1 **Waiting too long to write notes.** If you have a heavy caseload, it can be far too easy to put off writing your notes. But having to recreate things from memory is a very bad place to be. You should write notes while the information is still fresh in your mind. If you wait too long, you may forget to include important details, or get some details wrong. Strive to write your notes no later than 48 hours after your meeting with a student or BIT meeting. Ideally, do this as soon as possible after you complete your meeting. Practice good habits.



Important details can be easily forgotten if you wait until you have notes on several students to sit down and write.

- » **Don't do this:** "Carlos was discussed several weeks ago at the BIT meeting and given a risk rating of Elevated. The team discussed Carlos and his actions, and decided to explore ways to address the behavior he has been engaged in, with a focus on stopping them."

Why?

- *It's too vague.* Perhaps the author forgot many of the details because he waited too long to write this note.
- *It raises more questions than it answers.* Why was Carlos discussed? Why and how was he assigned that risk rating? What specific actions on Carlos' part were discussed? What exactly does it mean that the BIT "decided to explore ways to address the behavior?"

2 Employing subjectivity. Sometimes notes include opinions that are stated outright. Other times, subjectivity is more subtle, coming through in the author's written tone of voice. Opinions can be interesting, and they may not necessarily be wrong. They just don't belong on BIT, counseling, and case management notes.

- » **Don't do this:** "Amy missed her third appointment in a row despite the fact that I took the time to call and reminder her (again) about the appointment. I explained through an email that I am not being paid to be her personal assistant and keep track of her appointments and obligations, and that if she needed someone to do that for her, maybe she should re-evaluate her current plans to attend college. We rescheduled to meet next week, but I can almost guarantee she will miss the meeting again."

Why?

- *The author's feelings come through.* The author's comes off as being resentful, as most people might be if their time was being wasted. However, this is not something that should be conveyed. Consider how you would feel if you had written this, then had to read it on the witness stand or see it in the press.
- *It's a plaintiff attorney's dream.* Many lawyers would have a field day with this, asking what was put in place to address Amy's no-show, whether the author makes such predictions often, and if there is a plan for dealing with students when they fail to go to appointments. The bottom line is that you'd likely have a very tough time defending this note.

3 Being overly descriptive. You are not writing a novel. BIT, counseling, and case management notes should not read like an action sequence or soap opera. Certainly, you don't want them to be dry and hard to follow. Find a happy medium, remembering to stick to the facts and avoid unnecessary descriptors.

- » **Don't do this:** "The BIT met late in the evening after the offices were closed and locked for the night. In the twilight of the day, the team deliberated the fate of one Jared King, a student of exceptional intelligence, though lacking in common sense. Our deliberations continued for quite a stretch while we bandied about the merits of an intervention for said scholar, Jared King. The fruits of our labors resulted in an action plan of sorts. More to follow upon our next tête-à-tête."

Why?

- *It lacks professionalism.* Creative writing does not have a place in BIT, counseling, and case management notes.
- *It has limited usefulness.* Many of the details in this note have no relevance to the actual case discussed. It's long, so it'll take more energy to read through,

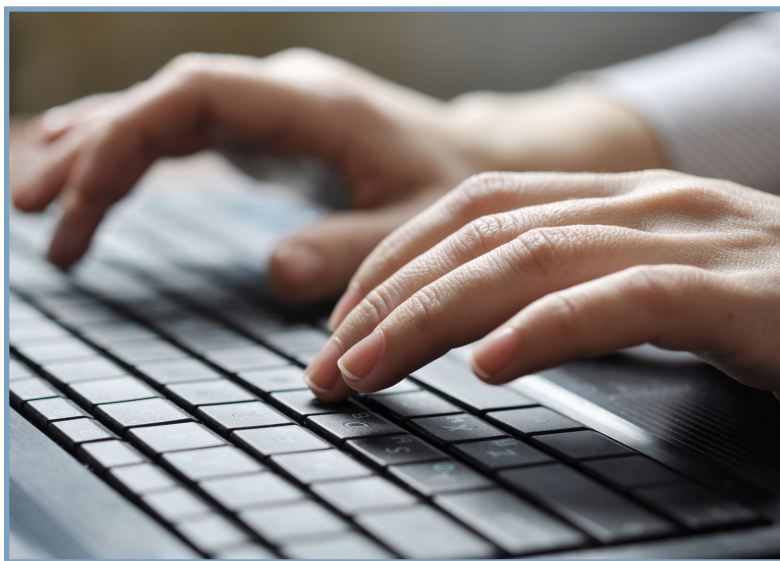
yet it's short on needed details, such as the action plan that was devised and how the student is "lacking in common sense."

4 Being too brief. Being concise is a good thing. However, notes that are too short are not likely to contain the depth needed for those reading them to understand what's really going on.

» **Don't do this:** "I met with Scott. We talked about his classes. Plan to meet again next week."

Why?

- *It contains insufficient information.* All we really know from this note is who the student of concern is and that the concern may have to do with one or more of his classes, which is just not enough to go on.
- *It raises more questions than answers.* Why did you meet with Scott? What about his classes? Is he having problems in his classes? Is he not going to classes? Why are you planning to meet again next week? What interventions have been put into place?



Just like cooking with spices, you want to be careful how much of how little you include when writing notes.

5 Writing too long. A note may be written well in almost every way, but just be too lengthy. BIT, counseling, and case management notes should be summaries. But sometimes, authors avoid summarizing and include as much information as possible. Resist that temptation.

» **Don't do this:** "The BIT met today to discuss Paul. Paul is a first-year student from a family that was not encouraging of him attending college. Despite the lack of support from his family, Paul has done well so far this semester with his grades. Paul is a biology major and taking Introduction to Biology, History and Systems of Marine Science, Calculus, and Health Sciences (a core class unrelated to his major). Paul completed Advanced Algebra in High School AP and was able to place into the Calculus

class ahead of his other classmates."

Why?

- *It provides unnecessary information.* If you include information beyond those that relate to the issue, you risk confusing people, and give them extra reading, which won't be appreciated given that most college and university faculty and staff are very busy and short on time.
- *There's a lack of focus.* Readers will be left wondering whether the problems/issues have to do with any of Paul's classes, yet we don't really know that from this note.

6 Including too many personal details. BIT and case management notes should include only details that are related to the issues at hand. Including too many details creates the same problems that being overly lengthy do and it can also create unneeded risk.

» **Don't do this:** "I met with Devin today to discuss how his week had gone. He told

me that he had sex for the first time with his girlfriend, Kim Ellenson, and that it was awkward, but still something that he was glad he did. Devin said that he had talked to his roommate, Dwight Harper, about his decision to have sex, and Dwight shared a story about how he had contracted an STI after he had sex for the first time, and Devin spent the rest of the night examining himself to ensure he wasn't having any type of symptoms, such as itching, odd discharges..."

Why?

- **It brings in other students.** There's no reason to include the girlfriend's or roommate's name in there. Remember, this is a FERPA-protected document, and it now contains the names of two students other than the subject.
- **Offers details of no importance.** Do readers really need to know that Devin found the experience to be awkward? Or that Dwight contracted an STI after the first time he had sex? There is too much detail here.

7 Being overly neutral. This problem often stems from a desire to err on the side of caution or be completely politically correct. But such notes can often be barely readable and miss useful information.

- » **Don't do this:** "The BIT met to discuss a student (reference case KU33439). The student had difficulty with his or her partner over the weekend and this resulted in the student talking with his or her RA to clarify the difficulties in the relationship. The current risk level for this student is Moderate based on the NaBITA threat tool. The action plan includes having the RA reach out to the student again and discuss his or her options regarding counseling and the relationship he or she is having."

Why?

- **We need more specificity.** The reader will likely need to know whether the student is a male or female, and whether the partner is a wife, husband, girlfriend, or boyfriend, given that the case is about relationship difficulties.
- **It can be difficult to follow.** When specific gender pronouns aren't used for individuals referenced in a case note, it can be hard to tell who is saying or doing what.

If it's likely someone reading your notes may not understand a term or abbreviation because it's clinical in nature, avoid its use in favor of a commonly understood, more general term.



8 Using jargon. While it may be OK to use jargon and diagnostic terms in a clinical counseling, case management, or BIT note should include only common language and terms.

- » **Don't do this:** "I met with Clark and we discussed his major depression, severe recurrent diagnosis (DSM-IV-296.33) and potential treatment options with his therapist. I encouraged him to consider DBT or CBT therapy to address the cognitive dissonance he has been experiencing in his strained primary group relationships. We discussed the importance of titration of his previous medication and the limitations and benefits of adding a mood stabilizer to his current regiment to improve his GAF functional score."

Why?

- **Your audience may not speak that language.** The people who will be reading this note (e.g., BIT members) may not come from a clinical background and may

not understand things like DMS-IV, DBT, CBT, and GAF.

- *It's unnecessary.* You could just as easily say that Clark is very depressed. This provides enough subjective detail for the audience.

BEST PRACTICES



- » Include the big threes. Good notes contain the following three elements.
 1. What's the person saying to you, or what's been reported? In other words, what's the problem you need to address?
 2. What's your intervention to the problem? How are you addressing it?
 3. Third, what happens next? Is there some plan for follow-up or monitoring of the situation?
- » Create the note as soon as possible. For a BIT, consider using a laptop to type up notes as meetings progress; you can clean up the notes after the meeting. If you can't get to the task immediately, say because you are meeting with a student and do not want to take notes while he speaks, try to do so within 24 to 48 hours at most.
- » Get another pair of eyes. If a note contains sensitive information or concerns a particularly difficult case, consider having someone higher up sign off on your note. That way, liability for what's in the note doesn't rest solely in your hands. And someone who may have more experience with such situations could provide suggestions for how to improve your note to make it more useful and reduce legal risk.
- » Know what to do with the note. Writing a case note is only part of the job. Once it's created, don't just let it sit in a database. Let those who need the information know about it within the established bounds of privacy and confidently. And if a situation is developing or changing very quickly, let others know what's going on, then write the note.
- » Demonstrate your thought process. Just as when you had to show your work in math classes as a student, rather than just providing the answer, do not simply skip to the end by only writing what decisions were made or actions were taken. When institutions land in court, it's not always their decisions that are problematic, but rather how those decisions were made.
- » Write what you need to, and nothing more. Create a concise summary that includes all the relevant facts and no facts or details that are irrelevant to the issue.
- » Know your audience. Notes should be written in such a way that any member of the general public would understand their content. Avoid jargon, slang, or idiosyncratic expressions.
- » Close any opened doors. In other words, if you mention something of concern in a note, such as a bomb threat or possible suicidal ideations, you've just opened a door. To close it, you must state how you are dealing with it.

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- » Type your notes. Hand-written notes are unprofessional and may not be readable to everyone. In addition, a hand-written file entered as a scan into a computer isn't searchable.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD NOTES

- » “The team met to discuss Thomas and his recent suicide attempt and return to campus. His parents were notified the night of the attempt. Thomas will be discharged this Friday and is scheduled to meet with counseling and his parents. Current risk level is elevated. Plan to have counseling review his hospital records and provide treatment voluntarily to Thomas. Release-of-information requests are being signed for hospital, parents and BIT. Follow-up with counseling scheduled for Friday.”

Why it works: The note isn't too long, or too short, and tells us everything we need to know about this case as BIT members.

- » “The team met to discuss Sarah, who had threatened her roommate, saying, ‘I will cut you with a knife, you whore!’ when she learned that her roommate had slept with her boyfriend. Risk level is severe. She has since been staying off-campus with a friend, both to avoid her roommate and at the request of campus conduct pending a threat assessment. She will complete this assessment on Oct. 25 with Dr. Miller. Results will follow 48 hours later and the conduct office will review to determine her ability to return to campus. Follow-up later in the week.”

Why it works: This is again, a note that gives us all the information we need in a fairly concise way. The use of the quote here is relevant and important because it provides insight into the incident and Sarah's frame of mind.

CONCLUSION

Not all case notes are created equal. By avoiding the pitfalls we've outlined and incorporating the best practices listed here you can create case notes that are maximally useful to those using them to help students, reduce legal risk for your institution, and demonstrate transparency and accountability. But like any skill, becoming a good note writer requires practice. We encourage you to use old notes as training tools, reviewing them with supervisors, other note-takers, and members of your BIT to discuss what works and what doesn't, and incorporate what you learn from those exercises into future notes.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The following on-demand, Online Trainings are also available for purchase through The NCHERM Group, at www.nchem.org:

- » BIT and Case Management Notes: 101
- » How To Write Case Notes: Practical Guidance & Risk Mitigation For Case Managers, Counselors & BITs

ABOUT THE AUDIO ESSENTIALS SERIES

The Audio Essentials series is produced and published by The NCHERM Group, LLC. New episodes will become available for purchase at www.nchem.org/store as they are created, so check back regularly for new episodes on the most pressing issues facing college faculty, staff and administrators.



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