

Technical Affairs

By Mike Aamodt, Associate Editor

Avoiding Common Problems When Writing Job Descriptions

Over the years, I have spent many hours editing job descriptions written by my students. What I should have done 24 years ago was provide them with a list of common errors to avoid. This year I got smart and thought I would also pass these guidelines on to ACN readers. The information in this column does not include a complete list of writing and grammar rules, but rather, ways to avoid common mistakes that occur when writing job descriptions. As always, if you have some suggestions of your own, please send them to me and I will include them in the next column.

Capitalization

Job Titles

When referring to a job title in the body of a job description, the title is not capitalized unless it starts a sentence. For example, “the *clerk* is supervised by the *cost accountant*. *Cost accountants* are in charge of the department.”

Time

Days of the week (Monday, Friday), months (October, January), and holidays (Labor Day) are capitalized. Seasons (spring, fall) are not capitalized.

Tools and Equipment

Only capitalize the *first word* for each tool or piece of equipment in a list.

- Soil mixer
- Personal computer
- Fertilizer bag

Departments

When referring to a department in the body of a job description, the department is not capitalized unless it starts a sentence. For example:

- Invoices are sent to the *accounting department*.
- *Accounting department* employees should arrive at work as scheduled.

Hyphens

The rules for hyphenation can vary by the source document. Therefore, the organization should select a particular style understanding that their style may differ from the style of other organizations.

Abbreviations

Hours of Work

Periods follow each letter in a.m. and p.m., they are not capitalized, and a space should be placed between the time 7:00 and the morning (a.m.) or evening (p.m.) designation.

- 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Weight

- Must be able to lift 15 *lbs.* (lowercase, period at end)

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are primarily used to show possession (e.g., Mike’s car) or for contractions (*didn’t* for did not). They are not to be used for plurals in abbreviations. For example:

- KSAOs is correct, KSAO’s is not
- POs (purchase orders) is correct, PO’s is not

Task Statements

Keep the verb tense consistent across tasks and use the third-person singular (i.e., he or she). The following is correct:

- *Waters* plants in the morning and in the afternoon
- *Pulls* weeds as necessary
- *Trims* dead leaves from plants

The following is not correct:

- *Waters* plants in the morning and in the afternoon
- *Pull* weeds as necessary
- *Trimming* dead leaves from plants

Put a period at the end of each task in a job description. For example:

- Waters plants in the morning and in the afternoon.

At a minimum, a properly written task statement must contain an *action* (what is done) and an *object* (to which the action is done). Often, task statements will also include such components as *where* the task is done, *how* it is done, *why* it is done, and *when* it is done. A useful list of action verbs and their definitions is located at the end of this column.

Here are some characteristics of well-written task statements:

- One action should be done to one object. If the statement includes the word “and,” it may have more than one action or object. For example, the statement “Types correspondence to be sent to vendors” has one action and one object. However, “Types, files, and

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sends correspondence to vendors,” contains three very different actions (types, files, sends).

- Task statements should be written at a level that can be read and understood by a person with the same reading ability as the typical job incumbent.
- Task statements should include the tools and equipment used to complete the task.
- Task statements should not be competencies (e.g., “Be a good writer”).
- Task statements should not be a policy (e.g., “Treats people nicely”).
- The statement should make sense by itself. That is, “Makes photocopies,” does not provide as much detail as “Makes photocopies of transactions for credit union members,” which indicates what types of materials are photocopied and for whom they are copied.
- When possible, avoid using abbreviations, slang, jargon, and “big words.”

Ambiguous Words/Phrases

Care should be taken to avoid the use of ambiguous words or phrases. Such vague phrases can be used by lazy employees to avoid work or by power-seeking

employees to expand territory. The following words/phrases are examples of some task statements that can be interpreted in many ways.

- *Responsible for* opening the store
Does this mean that the employee actually opens the store or just ensures that it gets done?
- *Handles* correspondence
What is the employee doing to the correspondence? Touching it? Responding to it? Sorting it?
- *Oversees* the accounting department
Does the employee directly supervise the department, indirectly supervise the department, or does he/she stand there and look at it?
- *In charge of* the copy machine
Does the employee operate the copier? Ensure that it is working? Decide who gets to use it?
- *Examines* supervisor’s daily schedule
Does the employee stare at it? Evaluate it to see if the supervisor is working hard enough? Review it to look for meetings of which the supervisor needs to be notified?
- *Communicates* policies to employees
Is the communication written? Oral? Individually or in a group setting?

Action Verbs Commonly Used in Task Statements

Administers - Manages or directs the execution of affairs.

Adopts - Takes up and practices as one’s own.

Advises - Recommends a course of action; offers an informed opinion based on specialized knowledge.

Analyzes - Separates into elements and critically examines.

Anticipates - Foresees and deals with in advance.

Appraises - Gives an expert judgment of worth or merit.

Approves - Accepts as satisfactory; exercises final authority with regard to commitment of resources.

Arranges - Makes preparation for an event; puts into proper order.

Assembles - Collects or gathers together in a predetermined order from various sources.

Assigns - Specifies or designates tasks or duties to be performed by others.

Assures - Gives confidence; makes certain of.

Authorizes - Approves; empowers through vested authority.

Calculates - Makes a mathematical computation.

Collaborates - Works jointly with; cooperates with others.

Collects - Gathers.

Compiles - Puts together information, collects from other documents.

Conducts - Carries on; directs the execution of.

Confers - Consults with others to compare views.

Consolidates - Brings together.

Consults - Seeks the advice of others.

Controls - Measures, interprets, and evaluates actions for conformance with plans or desired results.

Corresponds - Communicates with.

Delegates - Commissions another to perform tasks or duties that may carry specific degrees of accountability.

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Action Verbs Commonly Used in Task Statements (continued)

Designs - Conceives, creates, and executes according to plan.

Determines - Resolves; fixes conclusively or authoritatively.

Develops - Discloses, discovers, perfects, or unfolds a plan or idea.

Devises - Comes up with something new - perhaps by combining or applying known ideas or principles.

Directs - Guides work operations through the establishment of objectives, policies, regulations, practices, methods and standards.

Drafts - Prepares papers or documents in preliminary form.

Endorses - Supports or recommends.

Establishes - Brings into existence.

Estimates - Forecasts future requirements.

Evaluates - Determines or fixes the value of.

Executes - Puts into effect or carries out.

Expedites - Accelerates the process or progress of.

Formulates - Develops or devises.

Furnishes - Provides with what is needed; supplies.

Implements - Carries out; executes a plan or program.

Improves - Makes something better.

Initiates - Starts or introduces.

Inspects - Critically examines for suitability.

Interprets - Explains something to others.

Investigates - Studies through close examination and systematic inquiry.

Issues - Puts forth or distributes officially.

Maintains - Keeps in an existing state.

Monitors - Watches, observes, or checks for a specific purpose.

Negotiates - Confers with others in order to reach an agreement.

Operates - Performs an activity or series of activities.

Participates - Takes part in.

Performs - Fulfills or carries out.

Processes - Handles in accordance with prescribed procedures.

Provides - Supplies what is needed; furnishes.

Recommends - Advises or counsels a course of action; offers or suggests for adoption.

Represents - Acts in the place of or for.

Reports - Gives an account of; furnishes information or data.

Researches - Inquires into a specific matter from several sources.

Reviews - Examines or reexamines.

Revises - Reworks in order to correct or improve.

Schedules - Plans a timetable.

Signs - Formally approves a document.

Specifies - States precisely in detail or names explicitly.

Submits - Yields or presents for the discretion or judgment of others.

Supervises - Communicates with, trains and evaluates employees; plans and directs their work; has the authority to hire, transfer, suspend, layoff, recall, promote, discharge, assign, reward or discipline subordinate employees or effectively recommend such actions.

Transcribes - Transfers data from one form of record to another or from one method of preparation to another without changing the nature of the data.

Verifies - Confirms or establishes authenticity; substantiates.

Source: www.hr.ufl.edu/managers/writingdescriptions.htm

HR Humor

Spell Checker

Eye halve a spelling chequer
It came with my pea sea
It plainly marques for my revue
Miss steaks eye kin knot sea.

Eye strike a key and type a word
And weight four it two say
Weather eye am wrong oar write
It shows me strait a weigh.

As swoon as a mist ache is maid
It nose bee fore two long
And eye can put the error rite
Its rare lea ever wrong.

Eye have run this poem threw it
I am shore your pleased two no
Its letter perfect awl the weigh
My chequer tolled me sew.