



Writing Good Narratives

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension



The Narrative Section provides an opportunity to write about your work from a variety of perspectives. But how do you know when you've written enough to describe your work well, yet not so much that the reader can't follow your progress and make use of the report?

This tip sheet looks at writing a good "Progress toward deliverables" narrative report from the perspective of the fable *The Three Bears*.

Not enough: so little descriptive information that an Institute Director or DC could not discern what progress the educator is making.

Way too much: complete listing of all activities and meetings from educator's calendars; repeats of previous information.

Just right: a concise description of major activities, logically organized and emphasizing what is important and significant, not every little detail.

Progress toward deliverables in your individual plan

How your narrative is written and formatted effects how easily it can be read, or if it is read at all. These suggestions will make it easier to read and understand.

Don't pack it in

Sometimes there is a tendency to pack a lot of information into a written paragraph. If a narrative is describing a number of different ideas and their supporting details in one long paragraph, this can be confusing and tedious to read. Instead, discuss each idea in a separate paragraph or bulleted statement.

It can be tempting, especially if the report deadline is looming, to dump everything - activities, output numbers, outcomes and evaluation results - into a progress towards deliverables narrative report. *The intent of the progress toward deliverables section is to concisely report activities and perspectives related to signature programs or major efforts.* Output numbers should be recorded in the MiPRS output section, quantitative outcome data in the outcomes section, and impact and evaluation results as an impact summary narrative. It may take a little more time to put the appropriate information in the right location, but it will be much more valuable for the reader.

Link narrative to your annual plan of work

Relate your quarterly progress toward deliverable report to your annual plan of work. This can be accomplished by summarizing your overall plan of work goals in two to three sentences. State and relate your quarterly progress toward the achievement of your annual goals.

Avoid vague words

Vague words include: relatively, few, almost, some, usually, approximately, highly, often, appreciable, nearly, many and significant. Even a reader familiar with Extension will not know how many program participants are a "significant" number.

Delete excess

Three words you need to remember when writing a narrative are: **brief, concise** and **readable**. One way to accomplish all three of these ideas is to delete extra words, even whole sentences that do not contribute to telling the story or that add no new information.

Proofread your narrative

A narrative that is full of errors, whether factual, grammatical or spelling, looks unprofessional. The reader may even question your credibility. After you finish writing your narrative, check for typographical, grammatical and other errors, and correct them. Asking someone else to read your narrative is another good way of spotting problems.

Adapted from "Writing Extension Impact Statements", Richard L. Poling, University of Tennessee

See back for more information on progress toward deliverables specific to your Institute →

Health and Nutrition Institute “Progress Toward Deliverables” Examples

The Progress Toward Deliverables narrative section gives the reader an accurate idea of progress made during that reporting period toward goals outlined in your plan of work. Below are fictionalized examples of this section of MiPRS to help you in writing effective reports.

About right

*In the example below, an adequate amount of detail provides the reader with the **goal** of each area of program work and highlights **important activity and progress** that was made toward reaching that goal. Brief commentary is included to provide insight into ongoing efforts.*

My plan of work includes teaching 75 individuals each year in proper food handling skills using ServSafe curriculum.

- Taught a four day – 8 hour class for twelve Juvenile Home residents. Provided Food Handlers Certificates. Asked juvenile home director to join me in presenting certificates. Teaching this course to the JH residents is a highlight of the year for me. Many of them are very excited and proud to receive the certificate. Doing the training over a four day period allows me to connect with students and inspire them to learn about food safety as it relates to working in the food industry.
- Was contacted by a teacher to teach ServSafe to residents at a treatment facility with more than 100 residents. Established service contract the local ISD to provide 5 hours of training over a two-day period to 28 of the residents. Revised curriculum from the 8 hour training down to 5 hours of content.
- Responded to several calls for upcoming classes regarding changes in registration and book purchases

My plan of work includes teaching 100 individuals each year food safety skills using Cottage Food Law curriculum.

- Taught two sessions to seventy attendees at Ag Expo under the CANR tent. Not an ideal teaching location but made the best of it.
- Sent out several certificates for the online course.

My plan of work includes teaching 125 individuals each year food safety skills using the Michigan Fresh curriculum.

- Taught a food preservation class in Manistee County for 15 participants. A local business which has a classroom asked me to be a part of their summer home and garden series. They advertised and recruited the audience.
- Sent a message to county offices in District 3 counties letting them know that I answer food preservation calls and to send them my way. Answered several calls including Ask an Expert from eXtension.

Describe role and contribution toward work team

- Attended International Association for Food Protection annual conference Charlotte, NC. Excellent conference. Will share information on enhancing safety of locally grown produce as a potential signature program for 2014.
- Finalized state-wide evaluation tools for all food safety curriculums and created Survey Monkey links for all educators to use for data entry.

Other

- Wrote article on frequently asked questions on food preservation for MSUE news.
- Submitted news columns to the local paper.

Too much:

In this, way too much information is included for a single effort while pertinent details (who, what, where, when and why) may be left off. Often this includes a complete calendar listing of the educator's activities for that reporting period. Even though the details related by the author are accurate, including this much detail for all efforts makes it very difficult for a reader to wade through it all. Better would be to create a brief narrative and include detailed evaluation results as an attachment or report this instead as an impact summary, not progress toward deliverables.

Finished nutrition education program at Head Start, submitted 24 food recall and modified behavioral checklist to WebNeers data collection. Worked with DHS worker to present Cooking Matters for Teens; I was responsible to purchase all of the groceries. Attended and participated with Snap-Ed Educators call and adult team call. Attended and participated in district conference call; I took notes from the call which I then sent out to all participants. I will also be scheduling our next call. Researched and made plans to attend professional development webinars over the next six months; my goal is to attend one every other month as long as I have sufficient operating dollars to do this. Will have to wait and see. Started teaching SMN at 2nd grade and 4th grade in one elementary school. One of these classes will have to be rescheduled because of a teacher in-service conflict. I will call them to make the arrangements. Researched, wrote and submitted article to MSUE news and to local paper. Also wrote two articles for MSUE News this month. Right now am thinking about topics for next month's MSUE News articles.

I am still having tech issues with my computer; am considering purchasing a different one. Other staff tried to help with this problem, but nothing has worked. Spoke to support staff about it but it's not a county computer so they can't help. Contacting ANR Tech. I left several phone messages but have not heard back, so no resolution yet. Laptop shuts down, has drive issues, and is out of warranty. Outlook was installed but I can't access it—not sure why. Still no printing ability in my county so I have to rely on others to print for me. Two calls in to ANR about this as well, but also have not heard back on this.

In role as SE, continued to review staff's monthly mileage, attendance, and Outlook calendars. Responded to staff needs such as ordering necessary educational materials, adequate office supplies, compiling outreach letters/fliers in support of SNAP-Ed and EFNEP programs. SE collected and reviewed monthly SNAP-Ed Activity reports, monthly EFNEP Tracker sheet, and weekly reports for programming efforts. Conducted site visits. Last month, there were a significant amount of IT-related problems in the offices including internet and printers being offline, and phone system interruptions. This is very frustrating for staff and makes it hard for everyone to get their jobs done. SE spent approximately 10 hours in the month addressing these issues, although I probably could have spent 20.

Not enough:

Progress toward deliverables narratives should include enough information that the reader can get a feel for your program efforts and can relate them to workgroup and individual plans. This example does not meet that standard.

Progress toward deliverables:

- Local agriculture day promotion and OTP for 7 youth 10/15/2014
- Youth SNAP-Ed Show Me Nutrition Series began for 9 classrooms at Traverse City School on 11/1/14

Describe role and contribution toward work team

- NPA Work Team Adobe Connect 11/22/14
- Youth Work Team Conference Call 10/11/14
- SNAP-Ed Bi-Weekly Meeting 10/12/14
- District Monthly SNAP-Ed Meeting (Call) 10/18/14
- Participated in Healthy Family Fun Fair for Head Start Early Education 10/1/14
- Completed February Activity Report

Other

February Articles : Article 1- Whole Grains; Article 2- Importance of Hydration