

Avoiding Assumptions and Judgments

In the simplest terms, progress notes are brief, written notes in an individual’s treatment record that document aspects of that person’s care. When documenting interactions and interventions, providers may sometimes include assumptions or statements that reflect judgments. Progress notes should include only what you observe and hear, not your theories or opinions.

What Are Assumptions and Judgments?



When you make an assumption, you are reaching a conclusion or making a statement that is accepted as true or certain without full information or proof.

When you insert your own interpretations into an individual’s record, that is an example of judgment. You may be making judgments based on your own perspective, values, priorities, or cultural bias.

Why Should Assumptions and Judgments Be Avoided?



Making observations and following up on them is a part of every helping professional’s job. But there is a difference between writing a note based on factual, accurate information and drawing conclusions derived from partial or even presumed facts. Jumping to conclusions could prevent you from fully understanding what is going on and might lead to inappropriate interventions. Judgments limit your ability to work collaboratively with individuals to identify and address their concerns.

Practice: Identifying Assumptions and Judgments



Example 1: Let’s look at this statement written by a provider about Joseph:

Joseph is struggling with hygiene because he is depressed and doesn’t care about clean clothes.

What are the assumptions and judgments in this statement above?

- ➔ The word “depressed” is diagnostic
- ➔ Assumes Joseph’s hygiene issues are due to his “depression”
- ➔ Assumes Joseph “doesn’t care” about clean clothes

Rewrite the statement about Joseph in a clearer way, without assumptions or judgments:

Example 2: Let’s look at a statement about Joyelle and her parents Mark and Deirdre:

I visited with Mark and Deirdre today following their daughter Joyelle’s hospitalization over the weekend. They were reluctant to engage in making a plan. It is disappointing that they are not at all prepared or interested in her coming home next week and they didn’t want to talk about needed services.

What are some of the assumptions and judgments in this statement?

Rewrite the statement about this family in a clearer way, without assumptions or judgments:

Avoiding Diagnostic Language



Sometimes, when writing progress notes, providers include “diagnostic” terminology, such as “*Sam is depressed*” or “*Yesenia has a compulsive need to...*” In general, diagnostic language should be avoided unless being used to describe a diagnosis. (For example, *Martin’s challenges with hygiene, a symptom of his depression...*”). This is particularly important for providers other than those who are licensed to make a diagnosis (such as psychiatrists and nurse practitioners, or licensed social workers). Instead, providers can use non-diagnostic terms to document symptoms or behaviors. For example, an alternate way to say “*Sam is depressed*” is “*Sam reports feeling very sad, and says he doesn’t have the energy to get out of bed sometimes.*”

Tips to Avoid Assumptions and Judgments in Progress Notes



- ➔ Stick with facts and direct observations
- ➔ Provide specific details
- ➔ Use direct quotes (with quotation marks) from individuals to capture their feelings and their interpretation of their own behaviors
- ➔ Avoid diagnostic terms and instead document symptoms or behaviors
- ➔ Leave out your own strong feelings and reactions

Practice: Rewriting to Eliminate Assumptions or Judgments



Original Statement	What are the assumptions or judgments in this statement?	Rewrite the statement without assumptions or judgments
Miguel (age 2) had a temper tantrum because his visit with his father was disappointing.		
The house was filthy and disorganized.		
Larissa’s mother has expressed concern that her daughter’s friends are up to no good. Larissa stayed out last night without calling, proving her mother right.		
As a man of Caribbean descent, Jerome is resistant to taking his medication.		

Now let’s practice rewriting longer notes to reduce assumptions and judgments.

- ➔ Read the sample progress notes below. Think about the judgments or assumptions included in each note.
- ➔ Rewrite the note without any assumptions or judgments (feel free to use your imagination to fill in needed details).

Example 1: Melita (age 35)

I inquired about Melita’s substance abuse problem and she stated she does not abuse any drugs, although she is seen socializing with other residents who have substance abuse problems. When I asked about drug treatment, she adamantly refused. This shows her lack of commitment to protecting her health and lack of insight about her problems. I will follow up with Melita about her addiction at our next meeting.

Revise the note about Melita:

Example 2: Ms. Manning (mother) and Joshua (age 8)

I visited Ms. Manning at home. She has 4 children and two have bad behaviors so she feels overwhelmed. When I arrived, Joshua was racing around the house, clearly off his ADHD meds and Ms. Manning had zero control of the situation. We'll have to work on her parenting skills. She did call the school to set up a meeting as planned, but then failed to go to the meeting. I'm not sure she understands the importance of working with the school.

Revise the note about this family:

Example 3: Daryll (age 16)

Daryll recently dropped out of school which doesn't seem to be in their best interest. Their goal is to get a job. Daryll has good work skills, but really lacks motivation. I think they are having second thoughts about dropping out of school.

Revise the note about Daryll:

Noting Serious Concerns Without Full Information



There will be times when you need to write a note in which you share your concerns, but you don't have full-information. In these situations, you will want to make sure your note clearly indicates your concern, with the caveat that this information is not confirmed. You can use quotations and specific observations without making assumptions.

Example 1: Patricia

While visiting Patricia's home, I observed drug paraphernalia on the dining room table. Patricia denied using drugs and said the paraphernalia came from her roommate's brother who stayed over last night. This is a concern, but at this time there is no indication Patricia is using. This writer will continue to monitor the situation.

Example 2: Jay

The family session with Jay, his father, and his step-mother was very tense. Jay's father limited Jay's stepmother's participation in the conversation. He told her that he "would do the talking" and spoke in a loud voice. There was no physical intimidation. It is unclear whether there are safety concerns. Team supervisor has been made aware of the situation and worker will continue to assess safety concerns.

Look at Your Own Work



Step 1 Choose an individual you have worked with, perhaps someone you found especially challenging to work with and support.

Step 2 Review your notes for this person. Are there opportunities in your progress notes to be more specific rather than making general statements or assumptions? Could you have used direct quotes from the individual rather than drawing your own conclusions? Did your notes reflect any feelings, opinions or biases you might have had?

Step 3 Find a note that you feel could be improved. Write out a revised version below, incorporating what you have just learned. Then, show it to your supervisor or a trusted colleague to get their feedback.

Remember



- Check yourself when you feel strong opinions about something you observe while working with individuals.
- Be objective. Write progress notes using specific observations and facts.
- Be careful not to make assumptions. Explore issues fully with individuals and use their words whenever possible in your notes.

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Answer Key



Practice: Identifying Assumptions and Judgments

Example 1: Joseph

Original Statement	Revised Statement
<i>Joseph is struggling with hygiene because he is depressed and doesn't care about clean clothes.</i>	<i>Joseph's clothing is not clean, and he has noticeable body odor. Joseph reported: "I am depressed and the last thing I care about is clean clothes." After further discussion, Joseph also shared that the laundromat is far away, and he doesn't have enough money to pay for a wash.</i>

What is the problem with the original statement?

- The word "depressed" is diagnostic
- Assumes Joseph's hygiene issues are due to his "depression"
- Assumes Joseph "doesn't care" about clean clothes

Example 2: Mark, Deirdre, and Joyelle

Original Statement	Revised Statement
<i>I visited with Mark and Deirdre today following their daughter Joyelle's hospitalization over the weekend. They were reluctant to engage in making a plan. It is disappointing that they are not at all prepared or interested in her coming home next week and they didn't want to talk about needed services.</i>	<i>I visited with Mark and Deirdre today following their daughter Joyelle's hospitalization over the weekend. It was difficult to engage them in conversation about services and supports that might be helpful when their daughter is discharged next week. They were reluctant to elaborate, but repeatedly indicated they were "not feeling ready."</i>

What is the problem with the original statement?

- It is unclear what the provider means by "not prepared".
- Drawing the conclusion that the parents are "not interested" is an assumption made without any indication that the parent's feelings were explored.
- The provider's "disappointment" about the situation is a judgement and does not belong in a progress note.

Practice: Rewriting to Eliminate Assumptions or Judgments

Example	What is the problem with this statement?	Rewrite the statement without assumptions or judgment
Miguel (age 2) had a temper tantrum because his visit with his father was disappointing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Makes assumption about cause of tantrum without evidence</i> 	<p><i>When Miguel’s visit with his father was over, he was observed crying and throwing toys and was difficult to comfort and redirect.</i></p>
The house was filthy and showed a lack of organization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Needs details to describe “filthy” to demonstrate it is not a judgment</i> 	<p><i>On this visit, there were many unwashed dishes and food left out on counter. There were no hangers or dressers, so all of the clothing was on the floor.</i></p>
Larissa’s mother has expressed concern her friends are up to no good. Larissa stayed out last night without calling, proving her mother right.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“proving her mother right” is an assumption</i> • <i>Larissa’s mother’s statement should be in quotes (“up to no good”) otherwise it can be interpreted as the writer’s assessment</i> 	<p><i>Larissa’s mother expressed concern that her daughter’s friends are “up to no good”. She found her daughter in the park smoking weed with these friends last week. Last night, Larissa did not come home, and her mother is not sure where she was.</i></p>
As a man of Caribbean descent, Jerome is resistant to taking his medication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cultural bias, assessment, and judgment</i> 	<p><i>Jerome reports that he has not been taking his medication. He said it makes him feel groggy and he doesn’t like taking it.</i></p>

Example 1: Melita

Original Statement	Revised Statement
<p><i>I inquired about Melita’s substance abuse problem and she stated she does not abuse any drugs, although she is seen socializing with other residents who have substance abuse problems. When I asked about drug treatment, she adamantly refused. This shows her lack of commitment to protecting her health and lack of insight about her problems. I will follow up with Melita about her addiction at our next meeting.</i></p>	<p><i>I inquired about whether Melita was currently using drugs or alcohol. I shared my observation that I had seen her socializing with other residents who have substance use issues. She stated, “I don’t abuse any drugs and those people aren't bothering me.” When I asked about drug treatment, she said “I’m not interested in that and don’t need it.” I asked her to think about what support she needed to be healthy and I will follow up with her at our next meeting.</i></p>

Example 2: Ms. Manning and Joshua

Original Statement	Revised Statement
<p><i>I visited Ms. Manning at home. She has 4 children and two have bad behaviors, so she feels overwhelmed. When I arrived, Joshua was racing around the house, clearly off his ADHD meds and Ms. Manning had zero control of the situation. We’ll have to work on her parenting skills. She did call the school to set up a meeting as planned, but then failed to go to the meeting. I’m not sure she understands the importance of working with the school.</i></p>	<p><i>I visited Ms. Manning at home. She has 4 children and two have behavioral health challenges. Ms. Manning reported feeling “stressed and overwhelmed”. When I arrived, Joshua was racing around the house and throwing things off the shelves. I spoke with Ms. Manning about what would be helpful, and she shared that she was “at a complete loss” when it comes to helping the boys and that they were exhausting.” I explained that we could look into a parenting group that may be helpful.</i></p> <p><i>Ms. Manning was not able to attend the school meeting she scheduled. She shared that she doesn’t really know what she wants to ask them for. We agreed that next time, I would walk her through the process, help her outline her concerns and go with her to the meeting to provide support.</i></p>

Example 3: Daryll

Original Statement	Revised Statement
<p><i>Daryll recently dropped out of school which doesn't seem to be in their best interest. Their goal is to get a job. Daryll has good work skills, but really lacks motivation. I think they are having second thoughts about dropping out of school.</i></p>	<p><i>Daryll recently left high school in the middle of their 11th grade year with the goal to get a job. They have had several jobs and have some strong vocational skills (e.g. computer and customer service skills). After our last meeting, Daryll was going to complete three job applications, but was not able to. I asked why they were having trouble and they said, "I am just not sure what kind of job I really want."</i></p>
