

What's In, and What's Out

In the simplest terms, progress notes are brief, written notes in an individual's treatment record. Writing notes that are comprehensive yet concise, informative, and easy for other professionals to read is a skill that often takes years to master. One of the keys to writing progress notes is developing a writing style that is consistent, brief, factual and speaks both to the progress of the individual you are working with and your competency and hard work as a professional.

Progress notes are vital to good clinical treatment as they serve to track the individual's progress in treatment and communicate key aspects of services to other providers participating in the individual's care. Progress notes may also be reviewed by payers/managed care, auditors, future providers, attorneys, judges, and the individuals themselves. When your audience is this diverse and important, you need to make sure your writing is clear and easy to understand.

There are several principles of quality service provision that should be evident in the body of the progress notes. These principles include person centered, collaborative, trauma informed, and strengths focused. Progress notes should reflect goal directed activities which are reasonable and measurable.

What's In: Elements of a Progress Note



The content of progress notes is critical because it details the actual course of treatment for an individual. What to include in your progress note is a decision you make based on whether the information is **pertinent to the care being delivered**. While most Electronic Health Records will automatically include basic information, it is important to remember that progress notes should include:

Elements	Examples
Standard demographic information	e.g., name, date of birth, ID number
Date of service	month, day, year
Location	home, office, community
Duration of service (Time in/Time out)	60 min, 30 min, or arrived at 3:15 and finished at 4:00
Type of contact	face to face, phone
Modality	Individual, Group
Service(s) provided	e.g., psychotherapy, complex care management
Person providing service	name of provider and credentials

Additionally, progress notes should detail services provided to the individual/family and must include:

- ➔ **Participants (to whom the service was provided)**
Met with Trinity and her mother, Barbara.
- ➔ **Goal(s) and objective(s) that were addressed**
Reviewed the purpose of our meeting, which is to work on Trinity's goal of decreasing her aggressive behaviors.
- ➔ **Interventions/services provided (Goal-focused activities)**
Provided psychoeducation around triggers and assisted Trinity and Barbara in identifying and articulating Trinity's triggers for her aggressive behaviors.
- ➔ **Status of progress toward goals**
Individual has begun to show signs of progress – for the first time, Tiffany acknowledged that getting a lot of homework can make her feel overwhelmed, and then she yells at her mother.
- ➔ **Plan of action**
Next session, scheduled for Tuesday 6/14, will focus on assisting the family in identifying and developing coping skills that may be used to de-escalate Trinity's aggressive behaviors.

What's Out: What's Not in a Progress Note



- ➔ **Speculation or assumptions**
Since mom grew up in foster care, she lacks parenting skills.
- ➔ **Personal feelings or judgments about the individual**
Dad has a habit of hooking up with the neighbor while he is home watching his kids. Dad's behavior is unsuitable for raising children.
- ➔ **Any information, events, experiences or descriptions not relevant to the individual's functional status or treatment plan**
Lisa said she is visiting her sister, who is in an interracial relationship, this weekend.
- ➔ **Clinical judgments, conclusions, impressions or diagnoses that cannot be justified by accepted methods of assessment and treatment, your scope of practice, or other acceptable forms of clinical evidence.**

Common Errors When Writing Progress Notes



To ensure you don't spend a great deal of time writing unnecessary information, here are some common pitfalls you should try to avoid. These include:

- ➔ **Writing lengthy notes**
Progress notes should reflect the services delivered, the individual's response to the intervention, and the plan moving forward. This can be done concisely, no matter how long the session. A note for a two-hour intervention and a 30-minute intervention can require the same amount of words and space.

➔ **Writing a “play-by-play” of the session**

Detailing every conversation and interaction between the provider and individual (e.g., writer arrived at the home, knocked on the door, and proceeded up the steps or the individual mentioned ... and then this writer stated ... the individual responded by saying...). This type of dialogue is not necessary and only leads to wasted time. It is the quality of the interaction and how it relates to the service plan that is important.

➔ **Recording irrelevant details**

Details that are not directly related to the intervention goals and/or objectives are not necessary and should not be included. This includes naming or quoting anyone who is not essential to the case—it is essential to respect each individual's privacy.

➔ **Repeating/replicating notes**

Providers can easily fall into the habit of copying notes, particularly when similar interventions are repeated over an extended period of time. Notes should be modified each time to reflect the individual's progress and response to the intervention on the date of the note.

Practice: What's In, and What's Out



Below are statements about a session with Jeremy and his mom. Review the sentences and place a check mark next to the statements you think should **NOT** be included in the progress note.

- Jeremy and his mom came into the session actively in conversation.
- As soon as Jeremy and his mom entered the room, Jeremy told this writer about his new matchbox toy car, which is a red sports car.
- Jeremy's mom said she was very frustrated by Jeremy's behavior.
- Mom talked about the problems she had finding a parking spot.
- Mom talked about grandmother's constant complaining about Jeremy receiving therapy.
- This writer reminded mom about the strategies in the Love and Logic model.
- We talked about some of the challenges mom experiences when trying to implement the Love and Logic model.
- Mom's cell phone went off and she took a few minutes to talk with Jeremy's older sister.
- We talked about the positive reinforcement chart and broke the concepts into smaller pieces.
- After a few minutes, Jeremy interrupted saying he had to go to the bathroom.
- I suggested that during the coming week, mom focus on noticing the times Jeremy listens and to note that on a chart.
- Mom said she thinks this is something she can do.
- Jeremy spent most of the session playing with his mom's phone, but responded to questions when prompted.

Now write a progress note utilizing the sentences that remain.

Let's try another! Below are statements about an interaction with Damon. Review the sentences and place a check mark next to the statements you think should **NOT** be included in the progress note.

- Damon arrived for a regularly scheduled session.
- Damon apologized for being 5 minutes late to the appointment.
- Damon stated that his mother came over this weekend and they discussed his anxiety.
- Damon indicated that over the past week he has been struggling with increased anxiety and anger and got into an argument with his neighbor.
- Writer asked if Damon was using the coping strategies they discussed during the last session.
- Damon stated that he did not complete the diary card or practice his deep breathing techniques as discussed.
- He mentioned that he planned on practicing his deep breathing the other day but fell asleep.
- This writer reviewed coping strategies and barriers in using these strategies consistently.
- Damon was able to recognize that when he fails to use his coping skills, it negatively impacts his ability to manage his emotions and express himself effectively and appropriately.
- A new plan was developed with Damon to encourage consistent use of his coping skills.
- During our next scheduled session next Tuesday, we will review his progress towards using these skills and review his diary card.
- Damon is excited about his plans for this weekend.

Now write a progress note utilizing the sentences that remain.

Practice: What Should Be Included?



Below is a sample progress note that includes some unnecessary details. Try to identify only those statements that should be included. Rewrite the progress note to make it more concise.

I arrived at Mrs. Dolan's home for our regularly scheduled appointment. She wasn't home at first, but after coming up from her neighbor's apartment, arrived at 9:15. Once we got settled, I followed up with Ms. Dolan regarding a school meeting she was scheduled to attend. Mrs. Dolan stated she was able to attend and thought our preparation last week was helpful in assisting her in advocating for her son's James's needs. The school will be putting a number of supports in place to support James in achieving his educational goals. Mrs. Dolan stated that she finally met the school psychologist, Mr. Dugan, and found him to be really nice. She also stated that her neighbor, Jerome, thought Mr. Dugan was very helpful as he worked with Mr. Dugan when his son was a student there. Next, we focused our session on the challenges Mrs. Dolan is experiencing in managing James's impulsive behaviors. Mrs. Dolan noted that James has been having more tantrums and conflict with his parents around daily routines such as getting ready in the morning, doing age-appropriate chores and completing his homework. Discussed a number of behavioral strategies that Mrs. Dolan can utilize with James to decrease maladaptive behaviors. Mrs. Dolan stated that her neighbor told her to use some of these techniques but she did not want to use any techniques without reading about them first. Mrs. Dolan stated that she would be willing to try 3 out of the 5 techniques discussed over the next week. We agreed to meet next week on Wednesday, 6/7 to review use of the suggested interventions.



Look at Your Own Work



Step 1 Write a progress note for a recent service you provided.

Step 2 Use the checklist above to make sure you included all the necessary information. What is not on the checklist is just as important – if you have included non-essential details, consider taking them out.

Step 3 Share your progress note with a supervisor or colleague. Ask this person to review your note and provide you with feedback about the clarity of your note.

Remember



- Be concise
- Avoid unnecessary details
- Focus primarily on things relevant to the treatment or service plan
- Include relevant activities and intervention that occurred during encounter
- Include individual's response to interventions
- Detail plans for next session

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Answer Key



Practice: What's In, and What's Out Jeremy

- Jeremy and his mom came into the session actively in conversation.
- ~~As soon as Jeremy and his mom entered the room, Jeremy told this writer about his new matchbox toy car, which is a red sports car.~~
- Jeremy's mom said she was very frustrated by Jeremy's behavior.
- ~~Mom talked about the problems she had finding a parking spot.~~
- ~~Mom talked about grandmother's constant complaining about Jeremy receiving therapy.~~
- This writer reminded mom about the strategies in the Love and Logic model.
- We talked about some of the challenges mom experiences when trying to implement the Love and Logic model.
- ~~Mom's cell phone went off and she took a few minutes to talk with Jeremy's older sister.~~
- We talked about the positive reinforcement chart and broke the concepts into smaller pieces.
- ~~After a few minutes, Jeremy interrupted saying he had to go to the bathroom.~~
- I suggested that during the coming week, mom focus on noticing the times Jeremy listens, and to note that on a chart.
- Mom said she thinks this is something she can do.
- Jeremy spent most of the session playing with his mom's phone, but responded to questions when prompted.

A final version of the note should read like this:

Jeremy and his mother came into the session actively in conversation. As soon as Jeremy and his mother entered the room, Jeremy's mother said she was very frustrated by Jeremy's behavior. This writer reminded mom about the strategies in the Love and Logic Model. We talked about some of the challenges she experiences when trying to implement the Love and Logic model. We talked about the positive reinforcement chart and broke the concepts into smaller pieces. I suggested that during the coming week, mom focus on noticing the times Jeremy listens, and to note that on a chart. Mom said she thinks this is something she can do. Jeremy spent most of the session playing with his mom's phone but responded to questions when prompted.

Answer Key



Practice: What's In, and What's Out Damon

- Damon arrived for a regularly scheduled session.
- ~~Damon apologized for being 5 minutes late to the appointment.~~
- ~~Damon stated that his mother came over this weekend and they discussed his anxiety.~~
- Damon indicated that over the past week he has been struggling with increased anxiety and anger and got into an argument with his neighbor.
- Writer asked if Damon was using the coping strategies they discussed during the last session.
- Damon stated that he did not complete the diary card or practice his deep breathing techniques as discussed.
- ~~He mentioned that he planned on practicing his deep breathing the other day but fell asleep.~~
- This writer reviewed coping strategies and barriers in using these strategies consistently.
- Damon was able to recognize that when he fails to use his coping skills, it negatively impacts his ability to manage his emotions and express himself effectively and appropriately.
- A new plan was developed with Damon to encourage consistent use of his coping skills.
- During our next scheduled session next Tuesday, we will review his progress towards using these skills and review his diary card.
- ~~Damon is excited about his plans for this weekend.~~

A final version of the note should read like this:

Damon arrived for a regularly scheduled session. Damon indicated that over the past week he has been struggling with increased anxiety and anger and got into a verbal altercation with his neighbor. Writer asked if Damon was using the coping strategies they discussed during last session. Damon stated that he did not complete the diary card or practice his deep breathing techniques. This writer reviewed coping strategies and barriers in using these strategies consistently. Damon was able to recognize that when he fails to use his coping skills, it negatively impacts his ability to manage his emotions and express himself effectively and appropriately. A new plan was developed with Damon to encourage consistent use of his coping skills. During our next scheduled session next Tuesday, we will review his progress towards using these skills and review his diary card.

Practice: What Should Be Included

Sample edited version:

I arrived at Mrs. Dolan's home for our regularly scheduled appointment. ~~She wasn't home at first, but after coming up from her neighbor's apartment, arrived at 9:15.~~ Once we got settled, I followed up with Ms. Dolan regarding a school meeting she was scheduled to attend. Mrs. Dolan stated she was able to attend and thought our preparation last week was helpful in assisting her in advocating for her son's James's needs. The school will be putting a number of supports in place to support James in achieving his educational goals. ~~Mrs. Dolan stated that she finally met the school psychologist, Mr. Dugan, and found him to be really nice. She also stated that her neighbor, Jerome, thought Mr. Dugan was very helpful as he worked with Mr. Dugan when his son was a student there.~~ Next, we focused our session on the challenges Mrs. Dolan is experiencing in managing James's impulsive behaviors. Mrs. Dolan noted that James has been having more tantrums and conflict with his parents around daily routines such as getting ready in the morning, doing age-appropriate chores and completing his homework. Discussed a number of behavioral strategies that Mrs. Dolan can utilize with James to decrease maladaptive behaviors. ~~Mrs. Dolan stated that her neighbor told her to use some of these techniques but she did not want to use any techniques without reading about them first.~~ Mrs. Dolan stated that she would be willing to try 3 out of the 5 techniques discussed over the next week. We agreed to meet next week on Wednesday, 6/7 to review use of the suggested interventions.