
Writing Position Descriptions

An Agency Accountability Guide

Minnesota
Department of
Employee
Relations

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Approaches to Writing a Position Description

First Approach

Break the job down into objectives or responsibilities (i.e., reasons why management created the job - the responsibilities on the position description are examples of this). Then chronologically identify and describe - in abbreviated form (i.e., just the WHAT and the TO WHOM/TO WHAT part of the statement) - the key work behaviors required to accomplish or carry out each.

Second Approach

A slightly different approach from that described above is to first break the job down into activity areas (e.g., for a Human Services Technician position such areas might be "Identify Client Needs," "Design Programs with the Interdisciplinary Treatment Team," "Escort Clients and Assist with Meals," "Promote a Safe and Aesthetic Environment," and "Monitor Clients and Record Observations") and then identify the work behaviors which fall under each.

Third Approach

Another approach is to forget about objectives, responsibilities or activity areas and simply make a list -- again, in abbreviated form -- of the "high importance" behaviors performed on the job. By "high importance" I mean those behaviors which have the most impact on how well the job is done (consider consequence of error, contribution to overall job success, frequency of performance, amount of time spent, and behaviors which differentiate the job from adjacent classifications within the same class series).

For example, going back to work done by a Human Services Technician list:

- Draft client program plans
- Observe and record client behavior
- Coordinate clients' nutritional needs
- Serve clients' health and hygiene needs
- Transport clients to scheduled activities
- etc.

Five or ten principal responsibility statements should be sufficient to describe the most important things done on most jobs -- the "guts" of the job, if you will. We're not concerned with unimportant stuff -- once you've described the five or ten most important things you do, you've likely identified the vast majority of their job anyway -- and certainly the behaviors that would be focused on to classify the job appropriately and/or to develop an examination process.

If you are having a difficult time identifying (choosing) principal responsibilities, you may find it helpful to first make a list of the ten most frequently performed work behaviors, then another list of the ten work behaviors on which you spend the most time and, finally, a list of the ten work behaviors which you consider the most important/critical, independent of how frequently they are performed or the amount of time spent on each. Then select five or ten principal responsibilities from the three lists using the "impact" standard mentioned above (typically there will be a considerable amount of overlap among the three lists).

Definition of a Position Description

What is a position description?

It is a written representation of the duties assigned to a state position. A well-written position description is the key document in any classification review. A clearly written position description requires less information in the supporting documents. It should be accurate, up-to-date, complete, descriptive, and signed by the supervisor and incumbent.

When the employee's position description is completed, the employee's role and level of authority in relation to others should be evident.

Who is responsible for writing the position description?

When a position is occupied, the position description should generally be written by the employee with direction from the immediate supervisor. This depends, of course, upon the written communication skills which can be reasonably expected of the employee. This process allows the supervisor to communicate the role and accountabilities clearly to the employee, and allows the employee to participate in the process. The supervisor has the authority to make the final decision about the contents of the position description.

When a position is new, the supervisor is typically responsible for writing the position description.

What does the position description need to include?

A three-part form (#PE-00042-03) is used throughout the State of Minnesota to help give shape and consistency to position descriptions. The three sections - A, B and C - are divided into six subsections, described below:

- | | | |
|-----|---|------------------|
| A = | 1. Heading or Job Identification | 3. Reportability |
| | 2. Position Purpose | 4. Dimensions |
| B = | 5. Principal Responsibilities, Tasks and Performance Indicators | |
| C = | 6. Nature and Scope | |

Position Description: Part A

STATE OF MINNESOTA
DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

POSITION DESCRIPTION A

Employee's Name:

Position Control Number:

Agency/Division:

Activity:

Classification Title:

Working Title:

Prepared By:

Appraisal Period: _____ to _____

EMPLOYEE'S SIGNATURE/DATE

SUPERVISOR'S SIGNATURE/DATE

(this position description accurately reflects my current job)

(this position description reflects the employee's current job)

1. Heading or Job Identification

EMPLOYEE'S NAME: First, middle and last name of the person currently holding the position.

AGENCY/DIVISION: Name of the department, agency, board, commission, or institution in which the position is currently located. Include the name of the division or work unit if applicable.

ACTIVITY: The type of activity they are performing (e.g., Accounting, Personnel, SOCS Residential, Nursing, etc.).

CLASSIFICATION TITLE: The employee's state classification title.

WORKING TITLE: Working title, assigned to the position by the employee's agency.

POSITION CONTROL NUMBER: The six-digit number assigned to the position by the Department of Employee Relations.

PREPARED BY: Name of the person(s) who wrote the position description.

PREVIOUS INCUMBENT: Name of the person who formerly held the position.

APPRAISAL PERIOD: Beginning and ending dates (month/year) of the employee's official appraisal period.

EMPLOYEE'S SIGNATURE: Signature of the person holding the position, indicating that the employee accepts the content of the position description.

DATE: Month, day and year that the employee signed the position description.

SUPERVISOR'S SIGNATURE: Signature of the employee's supervisor, indicating that the supervisor agrees with the content of the position description.

DATE: Month, day and year that the employee's immediate supervisor signed the position description.

<hr/> <hr/> POSITION PURPOSE
REPORTABILITY
Reports to:
Supervises:
<hr/> DIMENSIONS
Budget:
Clientele:

2. Position Purpose

This concise, one or two sentence statement describes the overall reason the job exists. It begins with: "This position exists to..." followed by an identification of the objectives/functions of the position, not those of the overall division/department (unless it is a division or department head position).

Another way to look at it: What service or product would be missing if this position did not exist?

3. Reportability

REPORTS TO: Indicate the state classification title of the position's immediate supervisor.

SUPERVISES: Indicate the number and state classification of all employees formally supervised by the position. Note in parentheses if the subordinates are temporary or seasonal. If seasonal, list the normal length of the season (such as 3 months). Also, if the employee assigns work to, reviews the work of, or advises other positions but does not actually supervise them, these relationships should also be recorded and explained.

4. Dimensions

BUDGET: Dollar amount(s) of the budget that the employee's position controls, manages and/or influences. Include the total budget of the work unit, and separate salaries (over which the position may exercise little control) from program funds (over which the position may exercise greater control or influence). Include also the value of equipment, materials, other physical property and natural resources if they are indicators of the position's control or influence. Describe the level of control and/or degree of influence that the employee's position has on other budgets in the organization.

CLIENTELE: People and/or organizations directly affected by the employee's position. Who actually benefits from the employee's work? Who are the employee's customers?

NOTE: Add a definition section under clientele if you are going to use abbreviations or acronyms in the position description (as in SOCS = State Operated Community Services).

Position Description: Part B

POSITION DESCRIPTION B	EMPLOYEE'S NAME:	PCN:
Resp. No.	PRINCIPAL RESPONSIBILITIES, TASKS AND PERFORMANCE INDICATORS	Priority % of Discretion Time

NOTE: For identification, list the employee's name and position control number on the top of each page.

5. Principal Responsibilities, Tasks and Performance Indicators

PRINCIPAL RESPONSIBILITIES: Describe major activities in which the employee is involved. Normally there are 5 to 8 principal responsibilities for each position; they summarize a number of common tasks in a "what" and "why" format. A principal responsibility statement should have three parts. It begins with an action verb and includes the following:

(The employee) Performs what action/On what or to whom/To produce or achieve what result or product.

Examples of this simple format are provided below for Human Services Technician:

Identify and design programs/clients/to reduce client dependencies.

Consults/dietary/nutritional professional/so that optimal health status is maintained.

Examine/client's environment/so that client rights and individuality are maintained and health and safety of clients are ensured.

Principal responsibility statements may need to be combined if more than eight statements have been identified or if principal responsibilities reflect a percentage of time of five percent or less.

Also, if fewer than five principal responsibility statements have been identified and/or principal responsibility statements reflect a percentage of time of 40 percent or higher, review them to determine if a principal responsibility needs to be split into more than one principal responsibility.

A. Guidelines For Writing Principal Responsibility Statements

1. Contains the following three parts:

- **WHAT** is done (action verb)

The PRINCIPAL RESPONSIBILITY STATEMENT begins with a present tense, action verb(s) that describes precisely WHAT physical or mental activity is being performed.

- **TO WHOM OR WHAT** (object of verb)

The second part of the statement describes TO WHOM/TO WHAT the action is directed (e.g., writes reports, types letters, delivers packages).

- **WHY** (to produce what or expected output)

The third part of the statement -- the WHY -- provides the reason for the action by describing the expected output.

In short, **WHAT, TO WHOM/TO WHAT AND WHY.**

In writing principal responsibility statement's, brevity is a virtue -- conciseness with specificity is the goal.

Example of a Licensed Practical Nurse Principal Responsibility Statements:

<u>PERFORMS</u> <u>WHAT ACTION?</u> (VERB)	<u>TO WHOM</u> <u>OR WHAT?</u> (OBJECT OF VERB)	<u>WHY?</u> <u>TO PRODUCE</u> <u>WHAT?</u> (EXPECTED OUTPUT)
Plan, develop and implement/ Supervise/	nursing care plan/ clients/	address specific client needs hygiene/health standards are maintained

The WHAT and the TO WHOM/TO WHAT are absolutely essential; that is, some statements need not address the WHY. For example, the WHY may be unimportant, but frequently the WHY is very important because the WHY will indicate the importance of the behavior.

2. Is Written in Concise, Specific Behavioral Terms:

The principal responsibility statement should capture what workers do in relation to data, people and things. How specific does the action verb for the **WHAT** part of the statement have to be?

This is a critical question in this method of describing a job. Select the most descriptive action verb to begin the statement. The more specific (descriptive), the better. Avoid ambiguous verbs such as those listed below. (An extensive list of ambiguous verbs can be found in "Action Word Definitions".)

administer	develop	participate
analyze	facilitate	process
arrange	handle	provide
assist	help	review
conduct	interview	supervise
coordinate	investigate	teach
examine	maintain	prepare

Some of the ambiguous words on the preceding page say virtually nothing while others have a variety of connotations. Usually, they are not specific enough to describe what is being done. More descriptive verbs can usually be found. (An extensive list of descriptive verbs and their definitions can be found in "Action Word Definitions".)

If you cannot come up with a word that describes the action being performed, either a) break the activity down into the two or three most important behaviors and write a separate principal responsibility statement for each, or b) clarify the principal responsibility statement by also listing the specific tasks which make up the work behavior.

3. Describes an Important Part of the Job:

The statement should describe an important work activity (i.e., behaviors which have a high impact on whether or how well the job is done - consider consequence of error, contribution to overall job success, frequency of performance, amount of time spent, and behaviors which differentiate the job from adjacent classifications within the same class-series). Minor or relatively unimportant activities should not be described.

4. Describes One Activity or a Few Closely-Related Activities Which Make Up a Single Work Process:

Break the job down into its major objectives, outcomes or responsibilities (i.e., reasons why management created the job) or activity areas. Then identify the key behaviors which are done to accomplish or carry out each (if the job was broken down into objectives, outcomes or responsibilities) or which fall under each (if broken down into activity areas) and write a principal responsibility statement for each one.

How many statements are needed to describe a job?

Whatever number it takes to precisely describe the major activities (behaviors) the worker does. As behaviors become more abstract, fewer will be needed to describe the job; similarly, as behaviors become more specific, more will be needed. For most jobs, 5-8 principal responsibility statements will prove sufficient.

5. Describes Work that Produces an Identifiable Product or Outcome

6. Is Easy to Read and Understand

Persons unfamiliar with the job should be able to identify exactly what the incumbent does from reading the principal responsibility statements.

B. A Critique of Principal Responsibility Statements

Examples of Good and Poor Principal Responsibility Statements

Good principal responsibility statements should compare favorably with the criteria we have reviewed. Here are two examples of work behavior statements. Compare each of these with the criteria.

Example 1 - Assume responsibility for the nursing station in the absence of the charge nurse.

This statement probably describes an important part of the job but not in very specific terms. It also probably describes a much larger portion of the job than a work behavior statement should cover. The assumption of responsibility for the nursing station probably involves several specific functions such as: assisting physicians; directing the work of assigned staff; reporting, orally and in writing, all unusual physical and mental changes in patients; etc.

The first verb is ambiguous. Words like "assumes" "conducts" "administers", "manages", "coordinates", "is responsible for" are all very general. They don't really tell what is going on. The key to the verb is action--either physical or mental. "Walks", "types", "adds", "asks questions", "writes" are action verbs. Often this is the hardest part of the statement to write. Frequently no one thinks about jobs (particularly higher level jobs) specifically in terms of what is done.

There is no statement of purpose. The reason for the behavior or what is produced by the behavior is not stated. Statements should tell what is produced that the worker in the job or another job can use in another behavior.

And finally, it is unlikely that all readers would get the same meaning from the statement without identifying the major behaviors which make up "conduct."

The statement in Example 1 isn't good. It has almost everything wrong with it.

Example 2 - Coordinate records in order to document the patient's condition.

This statement probably describes an important part of the job. In this case it may describe the right amount of work for a principal responsibility statement. However, it may be too broad depending on what the words "coordinate" and "records" mean.

The verb is better than the previous example, but still not very specific. Does "coordinate" mean file alphabetically or chronologically? Does "records" refer to written documentation or a specific type of form? Or does it mean that the incumbent takes the material gathered and coordinates it into an easily understood format?

No purpose is given. In this case the purpose may be straightforward; i.e., so the materials will be readily available for use by others on the medical treatment team.

The statement in Example 2 can be improved by answering the questions we have posed.

Example 3 - Record patient's physical and mental condition on clinical charts and reports so that other staff can assess patient progress against the individual's treatment plan.

(WHAT?) Record/(TO WHOM OR WHAT?) patient's physical and mental condition/(WHY?) so that other staff can assess patient progress against the individual's treatment plan.

This statement answers the questions posed in Example 2. It has an action verb which is clarified by an explanation of "why" the action is taken. It contains a statement of purpose. All readers should be able to understand what behavior is taking place.

Principal Responsibility Statement Examples

PERFORMS <u>WHAT</u> ACTION (VERB)	<u>TO WHOM OR WHAT?</u> (OBJECT)	<u>WHY?</u> TO PRODUCE WHAT? (EXPECTED OUTPUT)
Group Supervisor:		
Direct and supervise	program staff	in order to effectively utilize people in the unit.
Develop and effect	orientation and training plans	so that staff are able to carry out their duties.
Develop	appropriate methodological approaches	so that the needs of each client are met.
Preserve	the physical environment	in order to comply with health and safety regulations and provide a clean, safe and pleasant place for clients.
Develop and update	a policy and procedure manual	to ensure consistency.
Groundskeeper:		
Place and operate	sprinkling systems	so that all lawn areas are properly watered.
Fertilize/control	grass/weeds	in order to ensure trees, lawns, flowers, etc. are kept healthy and growing.
Service	mechanical equipment	to perform scheduled duties and minimize down-time.

Position Description: Part B (cont.)

C. Task Statements

Task statements are specific and distinct activities that collectively comprise each of the employee's principal responsibilities.

Principal responsibility statements and task statements need to reflect the employee's delegated level of authority and involvement in the major activities. The employee's role in various fundamental areas must be clarified in relation to his/her supervisor, the employees s/he supervises, and other employees involved in the same functional areas (remember to refer to these individuals in the task statements).

For further instructions on writing a principal responsibility statement for supervisory positions, see Appendix C.

Use "Action Word Definitions and Action Word Definition Supplement of Ambiguous Action Words" respectively, to locate descriptive action verbs for use in writing responsibility and task statements. The use of accurate action verbs enables the reader to have a clearer understanding of the position responsibilities.

After the task statements and principal responsibility statements have been written, review them to ensure that the tasks are explicit. If necessary, expand on them.

In Section B, record the more important responsibilities first and the less important responsibilities last. List the principal responsibilities as numbers (1, 2, 3, 4) and the tasks alphabetically (A, B, C, D) under the corresponding principal responsibility.

D. Priority, Percentage of Time and Discretion

Priority: The purpose of this item is to rank responsibilities and assign priorities. The question to ask for each responsibility is: To what degree is this necessary to accomplish the job's purpose, work-unit objectives, and organization goals? If one principal responsibility has a greater influence on job purpose, work-unit objectives, and organization goals than other principal responsibilities, it receives a higher priority rating.

Assign the letter A, B, or C to indicate the relative importance of each principal responsibility to the total position according to the following definitions:

- A** Results are essential and must be accomplished.
- B** Results are important and should be accomplished, but not at the expense of A priorities.
- C** Results are desirable, but should not be accomplished at the expenses of A and/or B priorities.

Generally, positions have only one or two high level "A" priorities; the remainder are usually "B" and/or "C". However, some positions may have most or even all "A" priorities.

Percentage of Time: Assign a percentage of time to each principal responsibility statement based on the anticipated or actual percentage of time that the employee typically performs that responsibility. To determine the percentage, consider the time consumed by each job responsibility during a year's time. The total percentage of time for all responsibilities should be 100%.

Discretion: This defines the level of authority an employee is granted to perform tasks, make decisions, and take independent action. Assign the letter A, B, C, or D to each principal responsibility according to the following definitions:

- A** Employee investigates situations, makes decisions, takes appropriate actions, reports by exception and through normal review processes.
- B** Employee investigates situations, makes decisions, takes appropriate actions, and reports to supervisor immediately after action is taken.
- C** Employee investigates situations, recommends action to supervisor, makes decisions with supervisor, takes appropriate action, and reports to supervisor immediately after action is taken.
- D** Employee discusses situations with supervisor before investigating, makes decisions with supervisor, takes appropriate actions, and reports to supervisor immediately after action is taken.

In exceptional cases, individual tasks may need to have a different discretion level than the principal responsibility. In this case, indicate the predominant discretion level for the entire principal responsibility and the unique discretion level next to the specific task, in parentheses.

Performance Indicators: Should be included for the position description to be complete, however, they are not required for classification purposes and will not be addressed for the purposes of this training session.

Position Description: Part C

POSITION DESCRIPTION C	EMPLOYEE'S NAME:	PCN:
NATURE AND SCOPE	(relationships; knowledges, skills and abilities; problem solving and creativity; and freedom to act.)	

This section is very important because it clarifies the job by describing it from a broader perspective. Also, this portion ties in with the **Hay Job Evaluation System**, which assigns numerical values to three dimensions of a position. These are:

- **Know-How** and as part of know-how, human relations skill and knowledges, skills and abilities;
- **Problem-Solving**
- **Accountability**, which includes level of authority.

This section consists of four subsections:

Relationships: Describe both contacts within and outside the agency, including the reasons for these contacts, for example, receiving and giving information or persuading others.

Knowledges, Skills and Abilities: Describe any relevant knowledges, skills and abilities minimally required to perform the essential job duties. In addition, list desirable knowledges, skills and abilities. Describe how each is needed to carry out the job's principal responsibilities. Include any required licenses.

Problem Solving: Describe the major or important types of problems an employee must solve and the process the employee uses to solve them, also it is important to include the type of problems referred to a higher authority. Describe the creativity and/or innovation the employee uses in solving problems. For example, there is less creativity required when an employee is able to refer to a procedural manual to solve a problem than when an employee must research a problem to arrive at an innovative solution.

Freedom to Act: Describe 1) the employee's level of authority/dependence in carrying out the major job duties, including the highest level of action or decision-making that can be taken without review; 2) the employee's overall accountability in completing the job duties, including how frequently the employee reports to a specific higher authority, the method(s) of reporting to a higher authority (oral and/or written), and a description of the externally imposed controls that limit the employee's freedom to act, such as laws, rules or procedures.

Appendix A

Principal Responsibility Statement/KSA Derivation Form

WORKING TITLE: _____

The worker
performs
what action:

(verb)

On what or
to whom:

(object of verb)

Why:

(To produce or achieve what results or product)

Under what
instructions
or guidance:

(e.g., Under what kind of supervision or review)

KSA's
required to
perform or
to learn to
perform this
behavior.

KNOWLEDGES:

SKILLS:

Appendix B

Model Supervisory Principal Responsibility Statement

RESP. NO	PRINCIPAL RESPONSIBILITY STATEMENT	PRIORITY	% OF TIME	DISCRETION
1.	<p>Exercise supervisory authority so that applicable labor agreements and plans are equitably administered and employees under my jurisdiction will effectively perform assigned job duties to achieve the annual objectives of the section.</p> <p>A. Assess the qualifications of candidates and hire employees to perform job duties to achieve section objectives.</p> <p>B. Assign employees to work units to meet program objectives.</p> <p>C. Evaluate employee performance, rewards or disciplines employees and promote, suspend, discharge or change their status according to their performance.</p> <p>D. Assign job duties, train and direct employees in the execution of job responsibilities to achieve annual work plan objectives.</p> <p>E. Mediate and adjust grievances of employees according to the requirements of the appropriate contract or plan.</p> <p>F. Direct the writing of employee position descriptions and approves the establishment of assigned work tasks.</p> <p>G. Administer applicable labor contracts and/or plans fairly and equitably and in accordance with statewide employer policy.</p> <p>H. Perform all supervisory tasks in accordance with established equal opportunity/Affirmative Action, non-harassment, and employee safety policies and procedures.</p>	A	30%	A

Appendix C

Position Description Guideline/Checklist

Instructions: This guideline/checklist is intended to provide an efficient source of quality control regarding a position description. Fill in the blanks with the response that most accurately reflects the current contents of your position description.

- a) _____ 1. **Position Purpose:** a) Does the position purpose accurately summarize in one or two concise sentence the reason the current position exists?
- a) _____
b) _____ 2. **Budget:** a) If the employee's position controls, manages and/or influences budget amounts, are those amounts clearly and accurately written in dollars? b) If the budget contains separate categories for operating and equipment amounts, are those separate categories clearly shown?
- a) _____ 3. **Clientele:** a) Are the people and/or organizations directly affected by the employee's position clearly listed?
- a) _____
b) _____
c) _____
d) _____ 4. **Principal Responsibilities:** a) Are each of the principal responsibilities accurate and complete in describing the major functions of the current position? b) Are the principal responsibilities written in a clear, "(The employee) performs What Action/ On What or To Whom/ To Produce Or Achieve/ What Result or Product?" c) Are there an appropriate number (usually 5 to 8) reflecting a logical subdivision of the position into its major functions? d) are the more important responsibilities listed first and the less important ones last?
- a) _____
b) _____ 5. **Tasks:** a) Do the tasks reflect a division of each principal responsibility into its essential, relevant and functional subactivities? b) Are they written in a concise, "Action verb(s)/object" format?
- a) _____ 6. **Performance Indicators:** N/A
- a) _____ 7. **Priority:** a) Are there letters A, B or C accurately indicated for each principal responsibility statement?
- a) _____
b) _____ 8. **% of Time:** a) Are the percentages accurately assigned to each principal responsibility statement (and only to them)? b) Do they total 100%?
- a) _____
b) _____ 9. **Discretion:** a) Are the letters A, B, C or D accurately assigned to each principal responsibility statement (and in exceptional cases, to tasks)? b) Is there one letter per each principal responsibility statement (or task)?

- a) _____ 10. **Relationships:** a) Are the communication methods (oral or written) used to carry out responsibilities explicit?
 b) _____ b) Are committees which the employee serves on indicated? c) Are agencies, divisions, orgs. and/or individuals through which the employee's work is coordinated explicit?
 c) _____
- a) _____ 11. **Knowledge, Skills & Abilities:** a) Are the entry level knowledge, skills and abilities needed to carry out principal responsibilities specified? b) Is the relative importance of managerial, technical and human relations skills on the job specified?
 b) _____
- a) _____ 12. **Problem Solving:** a) Are the employee's most common job-related problems explicit? b) Are there examples of problems that must be handled by the present employee? c) Are opportunities for creativity explicit?
 b) _____
 c) _____
- a) _____ 13. **Freedom to Act:** Does the employee's position description clearly indicate: a) The frequency which employee reports to higher authority; b) Methods of reporting (oral and/or written); c) The external controls which limit the employee's freedom to act, such as laws, rules or procedures?
 b) _____
 c) _____