

Just the Facts—Writing a Report You Can Defend

You have been gathering information and meeting with attorneys, social workers, mental health professionals and teachers for the past several weeks. You have made weekly visits with the child to whom you have been assigned as a CASA volunteer. You have been in touch with your CASA supervisor, and she feels you are on the right track.

The time has come to submit your first report to the court. The court report is your chance to tell the judge what you think she or he ought to know—and, to some extent, what you think the judge ought to do. More than likely, the judge will review 30-40 court reports the day you appear in court. Part of your job is to produce a report that is well written and will get the judge's attention. When well written, your report can be concise and accurate yet still include all necessary information.

Upon reading your report, the judge should have a good mental picture of the situation, accurate information on the child's current status as well as where the information presented was learned and recommendations for decisions to be made by the court in the interest of the child.

In writing a report, the following steps are imperative:

- Begin work on your court report with plenty of time to get it to your supervisor in time for court.
- Use the court report format provided to you in training.
- Make the report child-centered.
- Be accurate! This means presenting exact information, free from errors and misstatements.
- Use the active voice in the first person.
- Report objectively and factually.
- Use specific rather than general words.

- Check your spelling—not only of the body of the report but the names and titles cited in the report.
- Write out all acronyms.
- State the facts as you know them.
- Use quotations if you have them, but make sure they are accurate in word and citation.
- Use the fewest number of words possible to describe an action or occurrence. Don't give the judge information he or she doesn't need to know.
- Be clear. State facts and identify your information sources clearly. Use short sentences and avoid technical jargon and abbreviations.
- Inform; refrain from making personal judgments.
- Make a case in the body of the report that relates to your recommendations.
- Be prepared to orally speak to and defend the information contained in your report as well as your recommendations.

As a CASA volunteer, you have a very important responsibility to the child and the court. Your court report not only helps inform the judge and others working on the case, it is part of an important written record which details the history of the case.

Be well prepared for court with a good, factual report. Your personal efforts supported by facts, common sense, knowledge of the law and permanency planning can influence a judge's decision to produce specific actions beneficial to the child you serve.