



**315-1
Basic Writing Skills**

A Training Outline

**Developed by
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**For the
Pennsylvania Child Welfare
Training Program**

**University of Pittsburgh
School of Social Work
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315: Basic Writing Skills

An Overview of the Curriculum

Rationale:

Excellent writing skills are as important to serving children and families as a fleet of county vehicles or good foster homes. Child welfare professionals must be able to express their thoughts in descriptive, concise, and accurate terms. Key to comprehensive and descriptive writing are good grammar, appropriate punctuation, and correct spelling. Finally, the child welfare professional must know how to construct efficient sentences and cohesive paragraphs

Learning Objective:

Learning objective for the curriculum include:

- Participant will identify proper punctuation, grammar, sentence construction, and spelling in documentation.
- Participant will practice proper punctuation, grammar, sentence construction, and spelling skills for writing documentation.
- Participant will practice proof-reading documents

Competency:

315-1 The worker can identify pertinent data for inclusion in case records and reports, knows how to organize information in a clear, concise manner, and is able to record summarized case assessments, case plans, and other supporting data into the family case record and reports.

Length of Workshop:

Three (3) hours

Materials Needed to Present Workshop:

The following materials are needed to present this workshop:

- Colored markers (at least two per table)
- Masking tape
- Name tents
- Overhead projector & screen
- Easel stand & flip chart(s)
- Curriculum
- Transparencies
- Handouts
- Letter stencils or rub-on letters (optional)

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An Overview of the Curriculum

Materials Needed to Present Workshop (continued):

- Writing examples that are humorous, noteworthy, or supportive of the material (optional)

Target Audience:

Child welfare caseworkers, supervisors, managers, and clerical staff

Summary:

Writing is critical in documenting the services we provide and the results of our hard work. Polished writing skills are needed to present our case in court, or request the services our families need. Basic Writing Skills covers the rules of clear and concise documentation- good grammar, correct spelling, appropriate punctuation, and tight composition- in a short, information-filled session.

Expectations of the Trainer:

The trainer should possess a working knowledge of the basic rules of grammar and punctuation, know how to spell, and be able to construct cohesive paragraphs.

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Agenda for a Half-Day Curriculum on Basic Writing Skills

Estimated Time	Content	Page
15 minutes	Introduction & Opening	4
25 minutes	Correct Spelling	7
25 minutes	Proper Grammar	10
15 minutes	Punctuation	12
30 minutes	Sentence and Paragraph Construction	14
40 minutes	Proof-reading	20
15 minutes	Closing and Evaluation	22

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Section I: Introduction & Opening

Estimated Length of Time:

15 minutes

Learning Objective(s):

- Participant will know the rationale, learning objectives, competency, and agenda for this workshop.
- Participants will meet the presenter and other participants.
- Participants will complete an exercise to increase awareness of their current skill level.

Method of Presentation:

Lecture and small group activity

Materials Needed:

Colored markers

Stencils or rub-on letters (optional)

Overhead 1- Learning Objectives and Competency

Overhead 2- Agenda

Handout 1- Learning Objectives and Competency

Handout 2- Agenda

Handout 3- Writing Skills Exercise

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Section I: Introduction & Opening

Outline of Presentation:

Prepare the room by placing markers, name tents, (optional stencils and rub-on letters), **Handout #1** and **Handout #2** at the tables. Presenter should then cover the following items:

- Welcome participants to the session
- Presenter should introduce himself /herself to the group
- Presenter should review the agenda for the session using **H/O#2**
- Presenter should cover the rationale for the session
- Presenter should review the learning objectives for the session using **H/O#1**
- Presenter should introduce the writing skills exercise, distributing **Handout #3** to each participant.

Step 1:

Presenter welcomes participants to the session, and introduces herself / himself. (This might be an appropriate time to mention any pertinent “housekeeping” details, rest room locations, telephones, etc.)

Step 2:

After stating the rationale for the session, the presenter reviews the learning objectives and competency for the session using **overhead #1** and **handout #1** to guide the presentation. Presenter should briefly cover the information, giving participants an opportunity to review for themselves.

Step 3:

Presenter should ask the participants to complete a name tent if they've not done so already. At a minimum, participants should put their name in the center, and include their agency and position. Instruct participants to introduce themselves to others at their table. (Explain that the limited time together doesn't provide much time to do introductions, and ask their cooperation in completing the introductions in 2 minutes.)

Step 4:(5 minutes)

As the introductions are being completed, the presenter distributes **H/O #3- Writing Skills Exercise** to the participants. Presenter reads the instructions on the handout, and asks for questions before directing the group to complete the exercise. Allow approximately 5 minutes to complete the exercise.

Answer key to the Writing Skills Exercise, Handout #3:

1. Wrong: should be singular *woman's*
2. Wrong: first your should be the contraction *you're*

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Section I: Introduction & Opening (continued)

Step 4 (continued):

3. Wrong: misplaced phrase. It's not combs for physically active people with unbreakable teeth. Rewrite as, "For physically active people, we have an"
4. Wrong: same as a double negative. Drop the word *not*.
5. Wrong: too wordy. Instead say, "Usually".
6. Wrong: (maybe less correct) since passive voice is used. Say instead, "*John's aunt witnessed the abuse.*"
7. Wrong: not a word. Use *regardless*.
8. Wrong: this is the contraction *it is*. Possessive form is *its*.
9. Wrong: *seen* needs a helping verb. *The supervisor and I have seen the report*, or *The supervisor and I saw the report*.
10. Wrong: you (the purchaser) weren't old and dog-eared!
11. Wrong: I hope you aren't filling the folders with staff!
12. Wrong: parallel construction demands that you finish the sentence with *and by Bicycle*.
13. Wrong: no need for commas when *or* is used in the sentence.

Step 5: (5 minutes)

After 5 minutes, the presenter should project **overhead # 2- Agenda**, and ask the participants to review their **handout #2- Agenda** as you address the topics to be covered.

TRAINER NOTE: The exercise questions parallel the agenda items. Draw that connection for the participants, and advise participants to be alert to when each question might be covered.

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Section II: Correct Spelling

Estimated length of time:

25 minutes

Learning Objectives:

- Participants will know the rules that assist in proper spelling
- Participant will identify the words that give them trouble in writing

Method of Presentation:

Lecture and individual activity

Materials needed:

Handout #4- Basic Spelling Rules
Handout #5- Rules for forming plurals
Handout #6- Commonly Confused Words
Handout #7- Commonly Misspelled Words

Overhead #3- Spellin'
Overhead #4- Basic Spelling Rules
Overhead #5- Rules for forming plurals

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Section II: Correct Spelling

Outline of Presentation:

Presenter explains that correct spelling is our first critical step in effective written communication. Presenter also expresses that even with clerical assistance and computer spell-check, it's important to know and understand how to spell. Suggest that a few basic spelling rules can help to enhance our ability to spell. Presenter then:

- Covers the spelling rules
- Covers the rules for forming plurals
- Introduces the list of commonly confused words
- Introduces the list of commonly misspelled words
- Instructs the participants to review the above information to determine where they need to improve

Step 1: (5 minutes)

Begin by projecting **Overhead #3**, or other light-hearted visual to start off the session. Distribute **handout #4- Spelling Rules**, and project the corresponding **overhead #4**. Cover each of the rules in sufficient detail to assure they are clear to all participants.

Step 2: (5 minutes)

Continue with **handout #5- Rules for Forming Plurals**, and project the corresponding **overhead #5**. Using the handout and overhead as a guide, cover the material for the participants.

Step 3: (5 minutes)

Distribute **handout #6- Commonly Confused Words**. Suggest that we often choose a similar sounding word, or incorrectly apply the wrong word to the sentence rather than having misspelled the word. The Commonly Confused Words list is meant to assist the participant when faced with such a choice. [Trainer might cite a few common examples or those the presenter has trouble with . . .]

Step 4: (5 minutes)

Distribute **handout #7- Commonly Misspelled Words**. Suggest that the participant keep the list nearby for help with spelling. [To add a personal note, the presenter might indicate a word or two that's plagued him/her.]

Step 5: (5 minutes)

Conclude this segment by giving the participants time to reflect upon the materials and highlight any areas they might want to note for improvement. Tell participants to consider making those items part of their action plan later in the session.

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Trainer Notes on the presentation of this section:

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Section III: Proper Grammar

Estimated Length of Time:

25 minutes

Learning Objectives:

- Participants will surface gaps in grammar knowledge
- Participants will know the basics of grammar in casework documentation
- Participants will know several ways to eliminate sexist language in written documentation

Method of Presentation:

Lecture and individual exercise

Materials Needed:

Handout # 8- Grammar "Fix it" Exercise

Handout #9- Grammar Rules

Handout #10- Sexist Language Rules

Overhead #6- Grammar "Fix It" Instructions

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Section III: Proper Grammar

Outline of Presentation:

Trainer explains that knowing the right words is not enough. We need grammar to help us use the language in a logical way. Breaking the rules of grammar can easily cause one to be completely misunderstood! Trainer goes on to:

- Distribute the “Fix It” exercise to help participants surface any gaps in their knowledge of grammar.
- Cover the basic grammar rules
- Cover the guidelines for eliminating sexist language from casework documentation.

Step 1: (5 minutes)

Trainer distributes the *Fix It Exercise* (**Handout #8**) and projects the corresponding exercise instructions (**Overhead #6**) while speaking to the need to understand the rules of grammar. Trainer might mention:

- Knowing the proper words alone may not be enough
- We need grammar to lend order to the words
- Failing to heed the basic grammar rules can result in being misunderstood

The trainer then invites the participants to review the *Fix It Exercise* and complete it individually. (Mention to the group that they have 3 minutes to “fix it”.)

Step 2: (10 minutes)

Trainer tells participants to keep the exercise at hand while the trainer covers some basic rules of grammar that will provide the answers to the Fix It Exercise. Distribute the basic grammar rules (**handout #9**) and cover the material in sufficient detail to insure participant understanding.

Step 3: (10 minutes)

Trainer introduces the nine techniques for eliminating sexist language (**Handout #10**) and reviews each with the group. Ask participants for any examples used in their organization. If time permits, ask what techniques they might employ after this session. [Trainer might mention the cultural awareness value of this segment as a reminder to participants.]

This might be a good place to break . . .

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Section IV: Punctuation: The Traffic Cops of Writing

Estimated Length of Time:

15 minutes

Learning objectives:

- Participants will know the basics of punctuation in casework documentation
- Participants will practice punctuation used in casework writing

Method of Presentation:

Lecture and individual exercise

Materials needed:

Handout # 11-	Punctuation Rules
Handout #12-	Punctuation Exercise
Overhead # 7-	Punctuation: Writing's Traffic Cops!

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Section IV: Punctuation: The Traffic Cops of Writing

Outline of Presentation:

Trainer introduces punctuation to the session, suggesting punctuation is a tool to guide the reader. Trainer then uses the appropriate handout and overhead to introduce a series of punctuation rules. After the trainer covers the material, a punctuation exercise is introduced using the information from the lecture, the punctuation rules handout.

Step 1: (10 minutes)

Ask the group what they consider to be the “traffic signals” of writing. Give the group a few seconds to answer. Then, confirm for them that it’s PUNCTUATION . . . the “*stop signs*”, *slow down “warnings”*, and *proceed this way “alerts”*. Tell the group that missing or misleading punctuation slows the reader down, and confuses our meaning.

Explain that punctuation can fill another role for us. Hard to punctuate sentences should provide the cue for us to rewrite the sentence. There is something wrong with the structure.

Introduce the rules of punctuation listed on **handout #11 and overhead #7** , explaining there are a few punctuation marks that come up often in dictation, our letters, and petitions. Suggest that by following these few basic rules, we can improve our writing and increase the likelihood of the reader understanding our meaning. Cover the information on the handout in sufficient detail to insure participants understand.

Step 2: (5 minutes)

Distribute the punctuation rules exercise **Handout #12** to the participants. Instruct the participants to complete the exercise using the lecture handout for assistance. Trainer should quickly review the exercise to insure all have the correct answers.

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Section V: Sentence and Paragraph Construction

Estimated length of time:

30 minutes

Learning objectives:

- Participants will know ten types of words or word uses to avoid in sentences
- Participants will practice eliminating unnecessary wording from their writing
- Participants will know the advantages in using active voice in most sentence construction
- Participants will know the basic rules of sentence and paragraph construction

Method of presentation:

Lecture and individual activity

Materials needed:

Handout #13- Ten Types of Words to Avoid
Handout #14- Unnecessary Words Exercise
Handout #15- Sentence Improvement
Handout #16- Paragraph Checklist
Overhead #8- A. Lincoln Quote
Overhead #9- Active Voice
Overhead #10- Active Voice Exceptions
Overhead #11- Improving Sentence Style

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Section V: Sentence and Paragraph Construction

Outline of presentation:

Now that the basics of spelling, grammar, and punctuation have been covered, we turn our attention to the construction of efficient sentences and tightly composed paragraphs. Information in this section will help the participants put their words together in concise sentences and paragraphs that deliver the message!

- Trainer presents ten types of words to avoid.
- Participants practice eliminating unnecessary words in their writing
- Trainer discusses the power in using active voice in writing
- Trainer reviews the rules of sentence and paragraph construction

Step 1: (5 minutes)

Trainer provides **handout #13**- Ten Types of Words to Avoid and reviews each type to assure the participants understand the need to use these types of words sparingly, if at all!

Step 2: (10 minutes)

Trainer projects **overhead #8**, Lincoln's quote concerning the flagrant overuse of words while discussing the economical use of words in our writing. Tell the group they should write to *express, not to impress*. Overusing adjectives and adverbs adds little to the message, and increases the prospect of "losing" the reader.

Distribute the Unnecessary Words Exercise, **handout #14**, and instruct the participants to take a few minutes to find a better way to make the statement.

Step 3: (5 minutes)

Suggest to the group that the use of active voice in writing is generally preferred since it's more memorable and less wordy. Using **Overhead #9**, explain the differences between active and passive voice in writing.

- Active voice- subject does the acting
(*The case aide delivered the reports*)
- Passive voice- subject is acted upon
(*The reports were delivered by the case aide.*)
- Passive voice is often used when the writer wants to avoid responsibility for what is written.
(*The recommendation to place the children was made.*)
- Passive voice is a combination of a *be* verb and a past participle. When you see a passive verb, you should consider whether to change the construction of your sentence.

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Section V: Sentence and Paragraph Construction (continued)

Step 3 (continued):

Finally, present the “exceptions to the rule” using **Overhead #10**.

- Passive voice should be used when the thing acted upon is more important than the person performing the action.
(The hearing was continued by Attorney Martin.)
- Use passive voice in technical writing, where the results are more important than the researcher.
(The results of the evaluations were divided into four age groups by our psychologist.)
- Use passive voice when anonymity of the person performing the action is desirable.
(It was reported to CYS that . . .)

Step 4: (5 minutes)

Trainer uses **overhead # 11**, and **handout # 15** to cover the following suggestions for improving sentence style:

- Sentences should be written in a manner that is **complete and mature**. The most common errors preventing complete and mature sentences in our documentation are:
 1. **Fragments**- groups of words used as a sentence, but lacking one of the critical components of a sentence, a subject, verb, or other essential piece.
 2. **Comma fault**- joining two independent clauses together using only a comma. Also known as a comma splice.
 3. **Run-on sentences**- the result of two sentences being joined without adequate punctuation or connecting words. Also known as a fused sentence.
 4. **Rambling sentence**- is one that goes on and on. Usually brought about by the overuse of the word *and*.
- Sentences should be **clear and exact**. Confused or “muddled” writing is frustrating to the reader. To write clearly, you must think clearly about the subject, be prepared to rethink (revise and edit) carefully. Avoid the following:
 1. **Incomplete comparisons**- results from leaving out words which are necessary to make the sentence clear and complete.
 2. **Ambiguous wording**- constitutes wording with two possible meanings
 3. **Indefinite reference**- the problem caused by careless use of pronouns. As a result, the reader isn’t sure what the pronoun is referencing.
 4. **Misplaced modifiers**- modifying clauses that are placed incorrectly and therefore the meaning of the sentence is unclear.
 5. **Dangling modifiers**- are modifiers appearing to modify a word which isn’t in the sentence, or the wrong word in the sentence.

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Section V: Sentence and Paragraph Construction (continued)

step 4 (continued):

- Sentences should be **concise and natural**. Somehow we've come to the conclusion that concise writing is not effective writing. We've decided that flowery, artificial writing is expected. Staff should work to develop a personal style that produces natural, and honest expression. Guard against the following common errors:
 1. Wordiness- using redundant expressions, double subjects, and saying the same thing twice in a phrase or word group.
 2. Flowery language- Using bigger words than necessary, or too many adjectives or adverbs.
 3. Deadwood- using many unnecessary words to express a simple thought.
 4. Trite expressions- resulting in flat and unnatural writing
 5. Euphemism- substituting a word or phrase so as to be less offensive
 6. Jargon- use of language that is particular to a certain field or profession
 7. Cliché- overused word or expression that offers nothing new or interesting to the reader.
- Sentences should be **smooth and graceful**. Move your reader along without interruption or re-reading. Some common mistakes to avoid are:
 1. Period faults- short, choppy sentences that generally are the result of overuse of the period. The resulting sentences have that "primer" style to them, reading like your third grade paper entitled, "What I did on my Summer Vacation".
 2. Split construction- resulting when a word or phrase is placed in the middle of the main thought.
 3. Mixed construction- beginning a sentence with one plan of construction, and then switching midway through the sentence.
- Sentences should be **correct and appropriate**. You should stick to language that is appropriate and correct when writing reports, summaries, petitions, and case file notes. Avoid using the following:
 1. Nonstandard language which might be acceptable in conversation, but not in official writing.
 - a. Colloquial expressions (Wait up)
 - b. Double prepositions (Get off of the couch)
 - c. Substituting *and* for *to*, or *of* for *have* when combined with should, could, would. (Try and find out. I could of been the worker.)
 - d. Slang, or the use of *in'* for *ing* endings (Yo, dude, what's happenin'?)
 2. Double negatives can take on a meaning completely opposite, but always sound bad. Using hardly, barely, or scarcely with a negative results in a double negative, too.
- Sentences should be **logical and consistent**. Ask yourself if the ideas in your sentences are arranged logically. Does the reader see clearly and accurately what you're attempting to show? Some errors you might make or see in writing are:

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Section V: Sentence and Paragraph Construction (continued)

Step 4 (continued):

1. Upside-down subordination- the main idea of the sentence is expressed as the dependent clause rather than the independent clause.
2. Anticlimax- beginning with the most important idea and continues with details that are unimportant or out of place.
3. Inconsistent (nonparallel) construction- changing the structure of the words or phrases being used in the sentence.
4. Shifts in construction- look for shifts in number, tense, person, and voice.

Step 5: (5 minutes)

Trainer moves to paragraph construction, and offers the following information about paragraphs:

- A paragraph is a group of sentences (or single sentence) set off as a unit.
- Usually the sentences in a paragraph are related in some way
- Sentences in a paragraph should revolve around one main idea
- Three qualities of a successful paragraph are: Unity, Coherence, and Development.
 1. Unity- it focuses on one main idea
 2. Coherence- it's parts are clearly related
 3. Development- the main idea is supported with specifics
- The anchor of a good paragraph is a topic sentence
 1. Topic sentence presents the main idea
 2. Other sentences in the paragraph should relate to that main idea
 3. Topic sentences generally appear at the beginning of a paragraph, but can appear anywhere, or even be implied.
 - A. When you want the reader to see the point immediately, open with the topic sentence.
 - B. When specific details are leading up to a generalization or conclusion, place the topic sentence at the end of the paragraph.
 - C. No matter how you organize the sentences, make sure each contributes to the main idea of the paragraph.
- Coherent paragraphs include details that fit together in a way that the reader can easily follow. Use of the following can build coherence:
 1. Organizing ideas- Clear organization of ideas creates coherence by avoiding the haphazard "clumping" of sentences; sentences that have only a remote relationship to one-another or to the main topic.
 2. Repeating key concepts- Repeated key words or phrases builds coherence by linking the sentences and showing the importance held by the word or phrase in the larger writing. (This doesn't mean to use the same words over and over. An example: In documenting an abuse cases, words like: *abuse, serious physical injury, bruising, and beaten* help tie the paragraph together.) Repetition helps the reader follow the logic of the paragraph and understand the writers point.
 3. Parallel structure- repeating phrases that are similar in meaning or structure.

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Section V: Sentence and Paragraph Construction (continued)

Step 5 (continued):

(Kennedy's Inaugural Address alerted all nations that we intend to "*pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe* in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty". Notice the parallel structure in *pay any price, bear any burden, etc.*? Each phrase begins with a verb and ends with a noun.)

4. Pronouns- Since pronouns usually refer back to a noun or other pronoun, they are good coherence tools to use.
 5. Transitional Expressions- are words or phrases that bring cohesion to a paragraph by helping the reader to follow the progression of thought. *For example, thus, after all, and likewise* help to signal the relationship between one idea and the next.
- Without development, unity and cohesion won't hold a reader's attention or fully explore the main idea of the paragraph. Details, examples, and evidence are necessary to prevent the writing from becoming dull and abstract.
 - In evaluating your paragraphs, use the following information shown on **handout # 16**. (adapted from St. Martin's Handbook, pp.133, 134)

Trainer should distribute the handout to all participants. Trainer should review all items on the checklist to assure understanding.

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Section VI: Practice Proof-reading

Estimated length of time:

40 minutes

Learning objectives:

- Participants will practice proof-reading documents containing errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and composition.
- Participants will know where to locate writing resource books
- Participants will make three commitments to improve their basic writing skills

Method of presentation:

Individual activity, small group exercise, and lecture

Materials needed:

Handout #17-	Proof-reading exercise
Handout #18-	Bibliography and Resource List
Handout #19-	Action Plan

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Section VI: Practice Proof-reading

Outline of presentation:

Having provided the information necessary to improve basic writing skills, the focus of the session turns to participant activity. Participants must use their newly acquired knowledge to correct documents containing errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation and composition.

After processing each document revision, the trainer introduces the action plan, and explains the “contract”. Participants then complete their plan, committing to three action steps to improve their writing skills.

Finally, each participant is provided with a copy of the Bibliography and selected writing resources.

Step 1: (25 minutes)

Trainer distributes **Handout #17**, Proof-reading Exercise, and instructs each table to complete one of the four examples. (To assure that all four are covered, the trainer should assign a document to each table.) Trainer should instruct the participants they have 10 minutes to complete the assignment. At the end of that time, the trainer should lead the group in a discussion of the changes, and the reasons for the change.

Step 2: (10 minutes)

Distribute the action plan (**Handout #18**) and quickly review the pieces of the plan. Instruct the participants to complete the plan on their own. Participants should check those items they feel need improvement. Participants should then make three action commitments they can agree to implement on the job. Be sure the participants have included a time line and person responsible for each of the three commitments.

Step 3: (5 minutes)

Distribute a copy of the Bibliography and Resource List (Handout #19) to each participant. Tell participants the Training Program may have writing resources available for their use, as would the local library and used book stores. Suggest that each participant consider purchasing a desk reference volume for their personal use.

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Section VII: Conclusion and Evaluation

Estimated length of time:

15 minutes

Materials needed:

Standard Competency-based Training Program Evaluation Form

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Section VII: Conclusion and Evaluation

Outline of Presentation:

Trainer brings the session to a close with a few words of thanks to the participants for their attention and hard work. Trainer should check for any final questions, or comments before distributing the standard course evaluation form. Trainer should remind the participants to complete the form in it's entirety so the Program can benefit from their input and suggestions.

Step 1:

Thank the participants for their attention and work. Offer to answer any last questions or hear any comments.

Step 2:

Distribute the standard course evaluation, asking the participants to fill them out completely so the Program can benefit from their comments and input.