

## Communicating Objectively About Animal Behavior

An animal's behavior should be described objectively whether reporting our experiences with an animal, performing an evaluation or recording information about its history. This helps us to communicate effectively about behavior in a way that does not have multiple interpretations. The value of information we provide is influenced directly by what words we choose to use.

Objective	Subjective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Fact-driven</li><li>● Measurable, observable verifiable through evidence</li><li>● Only what is seen and heard is recorded</li><li>● Neutral tone; carries no emotional charge</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Opinion-driven</li><li>● Feelings, opinions, judgements; cannot be evaluated or verified</li><li>● Motivations and internal feelings are attributed</li><li>● Positively or negatively charged; conveys a good or bad impression of animal</li></ul>

Objective descriptions help staff to:

- Collect accurate data and information about when and how often a behavior occurs.
- Design effective interventions and individualized goals.
- Determine whether an intervention is working.
- Write individualized goals.

The pitfalls of subjective writing:

- The writer loses credibility: When writing an opinion, if someone disagrees they will be less inclined to listen to you.
- It allows for multiple interpretations. For example, "I do not trust this dog," could mean that the dog is unpredictably aggressive, that the dog has some fearful behaviors that can be improved via training and socialization, that the observer is afraid of large dogs, that the observer is biased against the dog's breed, etc.
- The reader cannot get a clear picture of the behavior.

### Guidelines for writing objective descriptions

- Be observable. Describe the behavior precisely as it was seen or heard. Rather than writing, 'He wanted to attack the other dog,' write, 'When the dog on the other side of the fence came within 3 feet of him, he began lunging and biting the chain links.'
- Use action words.
- Avoid ascribing motivations, feelings or reasons for doing things. There is no way to observe a dog's motivation or feelings. Is a dog playing fetch because he loves it, or for another reason, such as boredom or toy guarding? Rather than saying, 'He loves playing fetch,' say, 'When we arrived at the pen, he picked up a tennis ball in his mouth and ran away from me. I threw another tennis ball. He retrieved it and let the other ball go. I threw the first ball and he retrieved it, letting the second ball go. We did this for the next 20 minutes, until it was time to go inside.'

- Be specific, not vague. Rather than writing, ‘He is barrier reactive to most people,’ write, ‘He was barked at 3 out of 4 staff members who walked past his kennel today.’
- Be concise.
- Be measurable.
- Record enough detail to relate what happened, but avoid biasing your description.
- Words should describe but not judge.
- Record behaviors in the order they occurred.
- Context is important! Behaviors which appear in the shelter do not always appear in the home. A dog who plays fetch for hours at the shelter may not do this at home.

## **The Teacher Test**

When writing about an animal’s behavior, imagine that you are a teacher writing the behaviors into a human student’s file. If there is a chance the student’s parents may read the description, how would you describe the behavior?

## **Include Detail**

When recording behavior, include details such as where, when, and how much. Depending on the situation there may be other details that would be helpful to include, such as preceding events, number of people in the area, preexisting medical issues or how much food the animal had eaten in the past day or two. For example, if a cat hissed at someone who came up to meet him, it might be helpful to note details like if they were wearing sunglasses and a hat, if they were holding a toddler who was crying loudly, or if the room was noisy and crowded with people.

## **Avoid Labels**

*stubborn      sweet      aggressive      sketchy      affectionate*

Labels tell us nothing about an animal’s behavior. Instead of using labels, describe the behavior that made you want to apply that particular label.

“I extended my hand, and she rubbed her face on my knuckles. She approached me and rolled over on her back at my feet while rubbing her cheek on my shoe. I petted her for approximately 10 minutes.”

## **Avoid Vague Words**

*never      frequently      usually      always      some      often*

Instead of using vague words, use exact numbers to document interactions, items, or times a behavior occurred.

“He barked on three out of four occasions that I walked past his kennel today.”

## **Avoid Using First Person**

*“I don’t trust this dog.”      “I would assume that...”      “I feel she will lash out if pushed.”*

Keep it about the animal's behavior, not your feelings about it. Use facts to make your point. If you feel a certain way about an animal, describe only the behavior that made you feel this way, not the feeling it produced.

"Her behavior toward me has been inconsistent today. This morning when I gave her a treat, she took the treat quietly. This afternoon I offered her a treat in the same way and she barked and lunged at me for approximately 15 seconds."

\* Perhaps something here about where this type of feedback might be appropriate—bring it up to supervisor for discussion at weekly meeting, etc.

### **Only Report Behavior that has Happened**

*"He has yet to bite but he has come close." "She didn't bark at me today, but that may have been a one-time thing."*

Only report the facts. Do not make predictions about how an animal will behave in the future.

For example, "He snapped approximately 2 inches from my hand this morning as I put his food bowl on the ground."