

Communicating Objectively to Shelter Staff

A foster pet's behavior should be described objectively when communicating to shelter staff. 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">• Fact-driven• Measurable, observable verifiable through evidence• Only what is seen and heard is recorded• Neutral tone; carries no emotional charge	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Opinion-driven• Feelings, opinions, judgements; cannot be evaluated or verified• Motivations and internal feelings are attributed• Positively or negatively charged; conveys a good or bad impression of animal

Objective descriptions help shelter 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 and measurable. 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 barking and showing his teeth.'
- 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, 'She loves playing fetch,' say, 'When we went into the backyard, she picked up a tennis ball in her mouth and ran away from me. I threw another tennis ball. She retrieved it and let the other ball go. I threw the first ball and she retrieved it, letting the second ball go. We did this for the next 20 minutes, until she laid down in the grass and dropped the ball.'

- Be specific, not vague. Rather than writing, ‘He is a sweetheart,’ write, ‘When he met my husband and daughter, his body was loose and wiggly and he immediately licked both of their hands and faces.’
- Be concise.
- 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! Make sure to include this information. Behaviors that 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. How would you describe the behavior so that the student’s parents can intervene appropriately, yet not feel that the writing is biased or take the description in a personal way?

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 the person was 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.

“We took four short walks today. 3 out of the 4 times I put her leash on, she began jumping and biting at the leash for approximately 20 seconds each.”

Avoid Using First Person

“I don’t trust this dog.” “I would assume that...”

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 with loose body language. This afternoon I offered her a treat in the same way and she stiffened, stood and barked at me."

Only Report Behavior that has Happened

"He has yet to bite but he has come close." "She didn't cower when I pet her this morning, 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."