

Telling the Story Well: Purpose + Principles for Ethical, Trauma-Informed Documentation

A guide for youth-serving professionals using equity-driven, trauma-informed approaches

Why We Document

Documentation tells the story of our work — and it shapes how youth, staff, and systems understand that story. Our purpose determines what and how we write.

| Purpose | Who It Serves | Examples |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| Ethical Accountability | You, your profession, and the youth | Fulfilling professional codes (e.g., NASW), ensuring integrity, confidentiality |
| Agency Requirements | Your team and leadership | Program consistency, supervision, safety, and risk management |
| Funders & Systems | External partners | Reporting outcomes, service delivery data, compliance |
| Youth & Teams | Direct service and care coordination | Supporting continuity, youth understanding, and transparency |

💡 Reflection: Which “why” drives your documentation most — and which do you wish carried more influence?

Fundamentals of High-Quality Documentation

| Principle | Description |
|-----------------|--|
| Objective | Record observable facts and youth voice. Avoid labeling or assumptions. |
| Purposeful | Write what is relevant to care, safety, and progress — not every detail. |
| Transparent | Write as if the youth could (and might) read the note. |
| Strengths-Based | Highlight resilience, capacity, and growth. Avoid deficit language. |

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Culturally Humble | Acknowledge bias and context; be mindful of how identity and power show up in your writing. |
| Confidential | Include 'enough to serve, never to expose.' Protect privacy and dignity. |

Language Matters

| Instead of... | Try... |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Client was resistant. | Youth expressed hesitation about the plan and asked for clarification. |
| She's manipulative. | She sought reassurance and checked for consistency in staff responses. |
| Failed to attend. | Did not attend scheduled session; plan to follow up on barriers or support needed. |
| Non-compliant with program rules. | Had difficulty meeting expectations; team to explore supports and clarity. |

Quick Self-Check Before You Save a Note

- Does this note align with our values (trauma-informed, equity-driven, strengths-based)?
- Am I describing what happened, or am I interpreting why it happened?
- Could the youth read this and feel seen with dignity?
- Does it meet the ethical, agency, and funder purposes it's meant to serve?

Personal Reflection

What is one shift I will make in how I document — and why?

Key Takeaway

We can meet compliance, ethical, and programmatic needs without losing our commitment to dignity, voice, and justice in the stories we tell through documentation.