

RESOURCE GUIDE

Manager Documentation Quick Guide

What to Document. What to Avoid. How to Protect Yourself and the Business.

Most employee issues don't escalate because of what happened. They escalate because nothing was documented, or it was poorly documented.

Good documentation:

- Protects managers from personal liability
- Protects the company from legal exposure
- Creates clarity and fairness for employees
- Prevents "he said / she said" situations

This guide gives managers a simple, safe framework — without legal jargon or HR overwhelm.

When to Document — and When Not To

Document	Hold Off (For Now)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Repeated performance issues ✓ Missed deadlines or quality problems ✓ Attendance or punctuality patterns ✓ Behavioral concerns (tone, conduct) ✓ Policy reminders after verbal coaching ✓ Follow-ups after feedback conversations ✓ Any issue that might be questioned later 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ First-time, minor issues resolved immediately ✗ One-off misunderstandings with no impact ✗ Emotional reactions without facts ✗ Medical details, diagnoses, or assumptions ✗ Anything involving protected disclosures (loop in HR instead)

Rule of thumb: If you'd want to remember this clearly 6 months from now, write it down. Not every issue needs formal documentation — but **patterns always do.**

The "Facts, Not Feelings" Rule

Documentation must be objective, factual, and specific. Document behavior. Not personality. When in doubt, pause and contact HR.

What to Include	What Not to Include	Where to Store It
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Date, time, and participants • Summary of the issue • What was discussed • Expectations set (goals, timelines) • Support offered • Follow-up plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal opinions (“lazy,” “unmotivated”) • Emotional language (“disappointed”) • Speculation about intent • Medical information • Protected activity references 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private manager log or HR-approved tool • Shared folder or personnel file • Never in personal texts, DMs, or informal apps

Side-by-Side: What It Sounds Like

<p>Strong documentation:</p> <p><i>“On April 12, I met with Alex regarding missed client deadlines on the Rivera and Strand accounts. We discussed time management challenges and agreed to weekly check-ins every Monday morning. Alex confirmed understanding and committed to improved timelines by May 1. Follow-up scheduled for April 19.”</i></p>	<p>Weak documentation:</p> <p><i>“Alex is always late on things and doesn’t seem to care. I’m frustrated. Told him to do better.”</i></p> <p>Why this fails: Subjective (“doesn’t seem to care”), emotional (“frustrated”), vague (“do better”), no date, no specifics, no follow-up. This wouldn’t protect anyone in a dispute.</p>
---	--

The 5-Minute Documentation Habit

After any coaching or feedback conversation, capture five things:

1. Write what happened (facts only)	2. Note when it occurred	3. Summarize what was discussed	4. Record expectations set	5. Set a follow-up date
-------------------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------------------	----------------------------	-------------------------

The Escalation Framework

Not every issue follows the same path. Here's how documentation changes as severity increases:

Level	What Happened	Action	Documentation
1 Coaching	First-time or minor issue	Verbal conversation	Personal note (date, topic, expectation)
2 Formal Feedback	Repeated issue or pattern emerging	Documented conversation with employee	Written summary sent to employee and filed
3 Written Warning	Pattern confirmed, prior feedback not corrected	Formal written warning with HR involvement	Signed acknowledgment, filed in personnel record
4 PIP / Final	Serious or sustained failure to meet expectations	Performance Improvement Plan or final warning	Detailed PIP with measurable goals, timeline, and consequences

Key principle: Every level builds on the one before it. If you skip a step, you lose the paper trail that protects you. A termination without Levels 1–3 documented is a termination without a defense.

Five Documentation Mistakes That Create Liability

- 1 Documenting after a termination decision.** If the only documentation that exists was created the week someone was fired, it looks like you built a case, not managed a person. Courts see this. Document in real time, every time.
- 2 Using emotional or subjective language.** “Bad attitude” is an opinion. “Interrupted three colleagues during the Monday standup on March 4” is a fact. One holds up. The other doesn't.
- 3 Documenting only negative events.** A file that contains nothing but complaints looks like a hit list. Document coaching, positive progress, and the support you offered. It shows good faith.
- 4 Keeping documentation in personal channels.** Text messages, Slack DMs, and personal email aren't secure, aren't discoverable, and aren't defensible. Use company systems. Every time.
- 5 Assuming HR will handle it.** Managers are the first line of documentation. HR can't file what you didn't write. Your notes are the foundation of every decision that follows.

Quick Documentation Template

Copy this structure for any documented conversation. Keep it factual, keep it brief.

Date:	
Employee Name:	
Manager Name:	
Type:	Coaching / Formal Feedback / Written Warning / PIP
Summary of Issue:	(What happened — facts only, specific dates and behaviors)
Prior Conversations:	(Reference dates and outcomes of previous discussions, if any)
What Was Discussed:	(Key points covered in this conversation)
Expectations Set:	(Specific, measurable changes expected and by when)
Support Offered:	(Training, resources, accommodations, check-ins)
Follow-Up Date:	
Employee Acknowledgment:	Signature: _____ Date: _____

Documentation is not punishment. It's clarity.

When done correctly, it helps employees improve, supports fair decisions, and protects everyone involved. **Strong managers document early, consistently, and calmly.**

Want the Full System?

This guide covers *what* to document. The full framework for how to coach, escalate, and protect decisions legally is in **The Performance & Documentation Playbook™ for Managers**. It includes conversation scripts, PIP templates, investigation intake forms, and the complete escalation process from verbal coaching through separation.

performancehrpartners.com/resources