

Do's and Don'ts of Writing and Editing Job Descriptions

Do – Give specifics

Rather than stating that a maintenance worker "keeps up equipment," it is better to spell out the position's requirements, which might include performing routine maintenance on assembly machines, including adjusting settings; cleaning and lubricating shafts, gears, and bearings; and dismantling and replacing defective parts, etc. Be careful, however, not to begin describing the work process or instructions for actually doing the work, for example, "Pick up the tool, select the proper size fitting, and gently burnish..."

DO – Use accurate adjectives

Include adjectives that describe the pace of work ("deadline-driven," "fast-paced") or the work environment ("enclosed area," "noisy setting"), but avoid flowery and overly long descriptions ("cozy but comfortable work environment that encourages creativity").

DO – Focus the job description on the job **not the incumbent**

It's easy to think about the individual in the job, and write about how he or she has chosen to do the work. A good job description focuses purely on job expectations and outcomes, not how the job is handled by the person who happens to be in it.

DO – Review the job description from a candidate's perspective

Not only are job descriptions used as an internal tool for a current employee and their supervisor, but they are also used to explain the position at Baylor to a potential candidate for a vacant position. Once the job description is written, review it from the perspective of a candidate outside of Baylor. Have you used terms that an external candidate would understand? Are you accurately reflecting the functions of the job? Does the "supports the mission by:" statement accurately summarize the position?

DO – Allow for flexibility

The job description is not an all-inclusive list of duties performed, but rather a reflection of typical work performed in that position. The job description should never restrict supervisors from assigning additional duties not specified in the job description.

DO – Keep job descriptions current

Change happens. There aren't many jobs that haven't changed significantly in the past few years. The time to write them—or update them if needed—is now.

DON'T - Use subjective terms, opinions or recommendations

Avoid using words that are subject to differing interpretations such as "this job is the hardest job in the plant, computerizing the inventory will make this job more efficient." Just talk about the job with reference to how it is currently done, not how it might be done. Instead of saying you seek a certain attitude, cooperation, or initiative, describe expected outputs, different constituencies with whom this position interacts, and the nature of those relationships (such as "reports to," "provides support to," "supervises").

DON'T – Use words that raise a question of discrimination

Avoid language that would be questionable in a job listing. For example, don't use words such as "youthful" or "able-bodied."

DON'T – Use vague, general wording, jargon or technical terms

Spell it out. It is tempting to rush through writing job descriptions by inserting vague language like "takes care of employment." Does that mean routine recordkeeping, labor negotiations, or executive recruiting? Does that entail responsibility for employment or just participation in the process? "Handles emergencies." This could range from simply calling 911 to being site coordinator for the entire emergency operation during an emergency. Clarify what you mean. Even if their meanings are well known to the jobholder and the supervisor, spell technical details out, so that those who might refer to the job description in the future, (including outside authorities), will know what it is saying.

DON'T – Describe duties to be performed in the future

"Eventually the position will include additional territories." It's important for the job description to reflect the current duties. If a change to the description happens in the future, update the job description at that time.

If you have additional questions about writing and editing job descriptions, please contact your Human Resources Consultant (HRC) at 710-2000 or AskHR@baylor.edu.