

CHAPTER 19:

Writing Better Bullet Statements

This chapter covers:

- Getting started
- Drafting Accomplishment-Impact Bullet Statements
- Polishing Accomplishment-Impact Bullet Statements
- Bullet Statement Mechanics

Bullet statements are used in many Air Force documents, from the Air Force papers discussed in chapter 16 to the official personnel records of Airmen. While this chapter focuses on writing better bullet statements for use in personnel records, the principles here can be used to improve any written product wherever bullet statements are used.

Performance reports/appraisals (officer, enlisted and civilian), awards and decorations are part of everyone's permanent personnel records. These records are used by commanders, managers and supervisors to document an individual's performance over a specific period of time. If you supervise just one person, you play a vital role in his/her career. You provide the opportunities for success and you have the obligation to document employee performance.

Through leadership, mentoring and effective writing, you can ensure the employees you supervise are afforded opportunities for success and increased responsibilities by documenting their success on performance reports/appraisals, awards and decorations. The guidance here is general in nature; you must ensure all performance reports/appraisals, awards and decorations you prepare follow appropriate instructions/regulations and applicable command guidance. Of course, the most important part of documenting performance is getting started.

Getting Started

- **Get Organized:** Keep records of all the accomplishments, awards, and recommendations for all those you supervise. Create a file folder—paper, electronic or both—for each employee and make regular entries to everyone’s folder. This will drive you to keep in touch with your subordinates and involved in their professional development.
- **Know the Format:** Most evaluation forms are written using bullet statements. Use the font and point size specified by the governing instruction or software used to produce the report.
- **Editing:** *The Tongue and Quill* includes a section on “The Mechanics of Writing” with guidance for grammar, punctuation, abbreviations, capitalization, hyphens and numbers to help you avoid misspelled words, typographical errors and other mistakes that reflect poorly on you and distract officials reading the report.
- **Write Effectively:** Get the reader’s attention. Positive words and phrases leave a lasting impression with readers. Neutral or negative words and phrases give the impression that the person you are writing about is average or below average.

Drafting Accomplishment-Impact Bullet Statements

The heart of effective writing involves writing effective accomplishment-impact statements. If you are like many supervisors, you’ve likely stared at a blank report and wondered, “How in the world do I even *start* to write effective bullet statements?” Whether you are in that situation for the first or 100th time, here are some steps that will help you write effective accomplishment-impact bullets.

Step 1: Extract the Facts

The first step is the hardest part of bullet statement writing—getting started! Supervisors often get in trouble early because they do not capture information on their employees regularly or completely. Without a good file of accomplishments for each employee, it is hard to write about what each has accomplished.

Gather the Information

Begin by getting organized and creating a file for each employee. Collect all of the information you can find that is relevant to each accomplishment and file this information in the file you have created for that employee. Capture everything you can—direct information and support that may be remotely related to the accomplishment—on paper or electronically. What looks unimportant today may be a key piece of information later. As you gather information and make annotations, consider the following tips for what to look for and how to mark what you find:

- **Isolate the action:** Isolate and record the specific action the person performed.
- **Annotate the record:** Mark the action with a power verb that best describes the action (e.g., repaired, installed, designed, etc.).
- **Measure the action:** Document related numerical information (number of items fixed, dollars saved, man-hours expended, people served, pages written, etc.).

- **Connect the dots:** Document how this accomplishment impacted the bigger picture and broader mission of the unit, group, wing, installation, command or Air Force.
- **Ask the member:** Facts and figures do not always present themselves easily. Talk to the people you supervise. They are in the best position to clarify information on the tasks they perform, provide details about what they have accomplished, and inform you on how the task was done (e.g., saving time, treasure or talent).
- **Ask others and check the tech:** Ask coworkers and other supervisors who may have seen this person in action. Also, consult Technical Orders, customers served, letters of appreciation, automated work production documents or other sources to get all the information you need.
- **Capture from the start:** Track your subordinate's accomplishments as they happen. Keep a record of significant work performance (both good and bad). This habit will help you be prepared when it's time for a performance report, feedback, award or decoration.

Gathering information does not take as much time if it is performed regularly. Be prepared to schedule ample time with your people and make notes on what you need to include (or verify) in an employee's record. If you think gathering information as a routine takes too much time, consider how long it will take to write a good performance report, award or decoration request without the information—and how much you will spend tracking it down in the face of deadlines and irate superiors. Without documented information on performance, you are forced to rely upon loose generalizations and vague statements rather than convincing facts.

Sort the Information

With the information you have gathered, the next task is to sort the useful items from the items that are not useful. Test each item to see if it is truly associated with the accomplishment you identified earlier or if the item is unrelated to the accomplishment. The test is to ask, "Is this bit of information solidly connected to this single accomplishment?" If the answer is yes, flag the information as useful. If the answer is no, line through or flag the information as not useful—but never throw it away or delete it! Although it may not be useful now, it may be just what you need for another bullet later. Continue applying this question to all of the items you've collected for this bullet statement. Once the bits of information are sorted, you will have a stack of information that pertains precisely to the accomplishment and the bullet statement to be written.

Step 2: Build the Bullet's Structure

The next step is to take the sorted information and organize it into an accomplishment-impact bullet. Group the sorted items for each accomplishment as either the accomplishment (the what) or the impact (who, when, how, why).

The Accomplishment Element

The accomplishment element begins with an action. Action is best expressed with strong action verbs. The table, below, contains a short list of action verbs that can be used to start bullet statements. These are not all the action verbs that can be used, but it should get you started in writing that next evaluation, appraisal, award or decoration package.

Action Verbs for the Accomplishment Element

Accomplished	Achieved	Acquired	Acted	Activated
Actuated	Adapts	Adhered	Adjusted	Administered
Advised	Agitated	Analyzed	Anticipated	Applied
Appraised	Approved	Aroused	Arranged	Articulated
Assembled	Asserted	Assessed	Assigned	Assisted
Assured	Attained	Attend	Authorized	Averted
Bolstered	Brought	Build	Calculated	Capitalized
Catalyzed	Chaired	Challenged	Clarified	Collaborate
Collected	Commanded	Communicated	Compared	Compelled
Competed	Compiled	Completed	Composed	Comprehend
Computed	Conceived	Concentrated	Conducted	Conformed
Confronted	Considered	Consolidated	Consulted	Contacted
Continued	Contracted	Contributed	Controlled	Cooperate
Coordinated	Created	Cultivated	Delegated	Demonstrated
Deterred	Developed	Devised	Displayed	Dominated
Drove	Elicited	Embodied	Emerged	Emulated
Encouraged	Endeavored	Energized	Enforced	Enhanced
Enriched	Ensured	Escalated	Established	Exceeded
Excelled	Expanded	Expedited	Exploited	Explored
Fabricated	Facilitated	Focused	Forced	Formulated
Generated	Grasped	Helped	Honed	Identified
Ignited	Impassioned	Implemented	Improved	Initiated
Inspired	Insured	Invigorated	Kindled	Launched
Maintained	Manipulated	Motivated	Organized	Originated
Overcame	Oversaw	Performed	Perpetuated	Persevered
Persuaded	Planned	Practiced	Prepared	Produced
Projected	Promoted	Prompted	Propagated	Propelled
Quantified	Rallied	Recognized	Rectified	Refined
Reformed	Regenerated	Rehabilitated	Rejuvenated	Renewed
Renovated	Reorganized	Required	Resolved	Revived
Sacrificed	Scrutinized	Sought	Solved	Sparked
Spearheaded	Stimulated	Strengthened	Strove	Supervised
Supported	Surpassed	Sustained	Transformed	Utilized

In some cases, action verbs alone just cannot fully stress the strength or depth of someone’s accomplishment. If you need to give action verbs an added boost, use an adverb to modify the verb. Most adverbs are really easy to pick out ... they end with the letters “ly.” Try connecting some of the adverbs listed below to the verbs listed above to get a feel for how the adverb-verb combination can intensify the accomplishment element.

Adverbs for the Accomplishment Element:

Actively	Aggressively	Anxiously	Ardently	Articulate
Assertively	Avidly	Boldly	Competitively	Compulsively
Creatively	Decisively	Eagerly	Energetically	Enterprisingly
Enthusiastically	Expediently	Exuberantly	Feverishly	Fiercely
Forcefully	Frantically	Impulsively	Incisively	Innovatively
Intensely	Powerfully	Promptly	Prosperously	Provocatively
Quickly	Relentlessly	Restlessly	Spiritedly	Spontaneously
Swiftly	Tenaciously	Vigorously	Vigilant	

Now that you get the general idea about how to begin the accomplishment element, let’s look at the rest of this critical part of the bullet statement. Broadly speaking, the accomplishment element contains all the words that describe a single action performed by a person. While this sounds simple, this rule is violated frequently. If two or more actions are combined together in the same bullet, each of the actions is forced to share the strength of that entire statement. So rather than combining two or more actions to strengthen a single bullet, writers must ensure bullets focus on only *one* accomplishment. Two examples of an accomplishment element are below: one uses simply an action verb; the second uses a modifier (adverb) for added emphasis.

- **Processed** over 300 records with no errors as part of the 42 ABW Mobility Exercise
- **Tenaciously processed** over 300 records with no errors as part of the 42 ABW Mobility Exercise

In summary, the accomplishment element begins with some form of action (action verb only or a modifier plus action verb) and contains a factual, focused description of one single action or accomplishment. With that established, let’s look at the impact element.

The Impact Element (Impact and Results)

The impact element explains how the person’s actions had an effect on the organization and the level of impact (e.g., work center, unit, wing, Air Force or Department of Defense). However, the scope of the impact should be consistent with the person’s accomplishment. For example, if the accomplishment explains how a person processed a large number of records during a base exercise, the impact should not be stretched to show how the Air Force will save millions of dollars. The impact must be accurate (more on that later); be careful not to stretch the truth when rendering full credit for someone’s accomplishment. For the accomplishment element above, the impact element could be as follows:

- ... all wing personnel met their scheduled clock times

Connecting the Accomplishment and Impact Elements

“ing”: Connecting the accomplishment and impact elements together can be done several ways. One of the ways is to use the “ing” form of words. See how the word “ensuring” connects our two elements in the example below:

- Processed over 300 records with no errors as part of the 42 ABW Mobility Exercise
ensuring all wing personnel met their scheduled clock times

Punctuation: Another way to connect these two elements together is to use punctuation that

- Processed over 300 records with no errors as part of the 42 ABW Mobility Exercise;
all wing personnel met their scheduled clock times

joins phrases together (conjunctive punctuation). The most common form of conjunctive punctuation in bullet statements is the semicolon. Let’s set off our previous example with a semicolon to see this approach in action:

Multiple impacts: If you have a situation where a single accomplishment has more than one significant impact, you may show each impact element separately but using sub-bullets. The bullet statement format for a multiple impact accomplishment separates the accomplishment element as the single dash (-) bullet statement followed by impact element sub-bullets with a double dash (--). Start each impact element sub-bullet with an action verb.

- Processed over 300 records with no errors as part of the 42 ABW Mobility Exercise
-- Ensured all wing personnel met their scheduled clock times
-- Helped the wing garner an overall “OUTSTANDING” rating from the IG team

CAUTION: The multiple impacts method of writing bullets for a single accomplishment takes a great deal of space where space is limited (evaluation forms). Some commands do not allow the use of multiple impact lines under a single accomplishment. Check with your local command for guidance. Similarly, familiarize yourself with the appropriate MAJCOM/Base/Wing/unit level guidance for commonly used acronyms, abbreviations, etc. to ensure your documents are complete and well written.

Step 3: Streamline the Final Product

Review: After extracting the facts we built the structure of the performance bullet by separating the information into two elements: the accomplishment element and the impact element. Then we connected the two elements and applied standards to make the bullets strong and meaningful. Now we need to streamline the final product and make the bullet statements accurate, brief and specific (ABS).

Accuracy

Accurate bullets are a must. To be accurate, they must also be correct. If the facts are stretched, exaggerated or embellished, then accuracy is lost. Exaggeration or embellishment, no matter how minor, is not the truth. Evaluations, appraisals, awards and decorations are permanent official records—let them be full of facts and truth that reflects our core values.

Brevity

Editing for brevity accomplishes two tasks. First, select words that are shortest and clearest, yet most descriptive to the readers. This means that long, confusing words or phrases are replaced with short, clear, common terms. Second, eliminate or reduce unnecessary words. Some of the words that all bullet writers should be looking to eliminate (or at least sharply reduce) are:

- Articles: a, an, the
- Helping verbs: can, could, may, might, must, ought, shall, should, will, would
- Also forms of *be*, *have*, and *do*
 - Forms of *be*: be, am, is, are, was, were, been, being
 - Forms of *have*: have, has, had, having
 - Forms of *do*: do, does, did
- Linking verbs: forms of verbs associated with five senses: look, sound, smell, feel, taste
- Name of the person when their name is printed elsewhere on the document
- Personal pronouns
- Prepositions (use them sparingly): over, under, in, during, within, etc.

Specificity

Specific bullet statements contain detailed facts. To write them, you'll need to be familiar with the people and systems involved. Resist the urge to estimate or generalize. Don't be satisfied with a range (10-20 units), or round numbers (approximately \$1000; nearly 3500 customers). Get the exact numbers and use them. With the first round of drafting complete your bullets are ready to be polished.

Polishing Accomplishment-Impact Bullet Statements

ABS stands not only for accuracy, brevity and specificity, but also for the critical “attributes of bullet statements.” After the first draft bullets are complete, keep ABS in mind as you prepare to polish your draft statements to clean them up, trim them down and give them the scrubbing they need before they become a permanent part of someone's official record. Consider the following bullet: how could it be sculpted to support both the accomplishment and the impact?

- Repaired 17 seriously corroded broken or missing Log Periodic (LP) antenna elements in the Atlantic Gateway Antenna System within 3 days by using elements from decommissioned antenna parts saving an estimated \$3500 in procurement cost and 4 weeks of expected delivery time

Accuracy

To make the bullet statement *accurate* you need to ensure the facts are correct. Verify the facts by simply asking a few questions. For this example, a few questions revealed a more detailed picture of the actual accomplishment.

- How many antenna elements were actually repaired? How many were replaced? In this example, 17 elements were salvaged from decommissioned equipment and repaired to replace the seriously damaged and corroded elements; an additional 23 elements were repaired (sanded, repainted or recovered).
- How long does delivery really take and why? Four weeks of delivery time seems like a long time; why does it take so long to receive antenna parts? The antenna elements come from only one vendor and the estimated delivery time is based on the relatively low priority of the work order.

Specificity

The content for this example has a close relationship between accuracy and specificity. Details about your work may be likewise connected. The point is that sculpting your ABS does not require them to be done in A-B-S order. Here, we consider the specificity and will close with brevity. In order to make the facts in the bullet statement as specific as possible, follow the same question and answer method used to guarantee accuracy.

- Exactly how many antennas were fixed? A total of 40 antenna elements were repaired or replaced from all six LP antennas in the system.
- How much cost was actually saved? The exact cost charged to the unit for purchasing the 17 replacement antenna elements would have been \$3479.
- How would the cost savings be spent? The \$3500 cost savings estimate is based on various antenna elements from an AN/GRA-4(V)4 Log Periodic antenna system that do not need to be purchased due to the repair of elements from decommissioned antennas.
- What is the Atlantic Gateway Antenna System? The Atlantic Gateway Antenna System connects Air Force and other DoD users from the eastern seaboard of the US to military personnel in Western Europe.
- How has the repair of the antennas improved service to their customers? Transmit and receive signal strength was improved; static and cross-talk was reduced.

Revised bullet: With the information gathered we can edit the bullet for accuracy and specificity. While not every item of information could be added, the items that are included (shown in BOLD, below) contribute significantly to the message being sent.

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Restored 40 seriously corroded, broken, or missing elements on 6 AN/GRA-4 Log Periodic Antenna Systems in the Atlantic Gateway Antenna System within 3 days by using elements from decommissioned antenna parts-- Saved an estimated \$3.4K in procurement cost and four weeks of expected delivery time-- Sharply improved clarity of voice signal for operators in US and Europe |
|---|

The added information enabled us to build an additional impact element and sharpen the details of the draft bullet. The bullet has also grown in length: now we need to sculpt for brevity.

Brevity

Recall that editing for brevity includes editing for shorter words and the reduction of unnecessary words. Keeping these dual tasks separate may be difficult, so do both at the same time! Changes made to improve one aspect often promote the other. The three sections that follow track the changes before, during and after editing for brevity: bold or underlined items are added; lined through items are deleted.

Before Editing for Brevity

- **Restored 40** seriously corroded, broken, or missing elements **on 6 AN/GRA-4 Log Periodic Antenna Systems** in the Atlantic Gateway Antenna System within 3 days by using elements from decommissioned antenna parts
 - **Saved** an estimated **\$3.4K** in procurement cost and four weeks of expected delivery time
 - **Sharply improved clarity of voice signal for operators in US and Europe**

Editing for Brevity

- **Restored 40** ~~seriously corroded, broken, or missing~~ **damaged** elements **on 6 six AN/GRA-4 Log Periodic Antennas Systems** ~~in the Atlantic Gateway Antenna System~~ within 3 days by using elements from decommissioned antenna parts
 - ~~Saved~~ an estimated ~~\$3.4K~~ in ~~procurement cost~~ and ~~4~~weeks of expected delivery time
 - **Sharply improved voice clarity of ~~voice~~ signal for Atlantic Gateway Antenna System operators in US and Europe**

After Editing for Brevity

- Restored 40 damaged elements on six AN/GRA-4 Log Periodic Antennas in 3 days using decommissioned antenna parts
 - Saved \$3.4K and 4 weeks of expected delivery time
 - Sharply improved voice clarity for Atlantic Gateway Antenna System operators in US and Europe

You've just successfully completed the process of drafting, streamlining and polishing effective accomplishment-impact bullet statements. While the system in the example is dated, the process for drafting, streamlining and polishing bullets is timeless and applies to the accomplishments of all who serve in the Air Force today and tomorrow. With a little more practice, you can Extract the Facts, Build the Structure and Streamline the Final Product with ease. Writing convincing and truthful accomplishment-impact bullets will become almost second nature to you.

Bullet Statement Mechanics

Chapter 16 presented the initial discussion on bullet statement mechanics for the preparation of point papers, talking papers and bullet background papers. The bullets for most evaluations, appraisals, awards and decorations are built in the same way as discussed in chapter 16, but check for specific guidance for the form used by the evaluation, appraisal, award or decoration you are preparing. The guidance that follows reinforces the bullet statement drafting, polishing and formatting of previous discussions with the focus on evaluations, appraisals, awards and decorations. The following outline presents bullet statement mechanics as bullets to give you both written and visual guidance.

Bullet/text format and alignment

- Start main bullets with a single dash (-)
 - This is a secondary level bullet and it uses two dashes (--)
 - Text within a bullet wraps so that the first character of the second and any subsequent lines aligns directly under the first character, not the dash, of the line above
- Indent subordinate bullets so that the first dash of the subordinate bullet aligns directly under the first character, not the dash, of the parent bullet one level above
 - This secondary bullet is subordinate to the “indent subordinate bullets” bullet
 - This is a tertiary bullet and it uses three dashes (---)
 - This tertiary bullet is subordinate to “This secondary bullet” above
 - If bullets are divided, there must be at least two subordinate bullets
 - The cardinal rule of outlining (chapter 6) states that any topic (or bullet) that is divided must have at least two parts
 - Though often violated, the cardinal rule applies to bullets

Punctuation

- Use internal punctuation as required for accomplishment-impact bullet statements
- Never use ending punctuation in accomplishment-impact bullet statements

Grammar

- Always start an accomplishment-impact bullet with action (action verb or modified verb)
- Never start an accomplishment-impact bullet with a proper noun or pronoun
- Minimize the use of the individual’s name in bullets when it is elsewhere on the document
- Avoid using personal pronouns (he, she, his, her, etc.) in accomplishment-impact bullet statements; these devices typically serve to form complete sentences