

Writing a good work narrative



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Next to police and firefighters, letter carriers may be the most visible public servants in America. However, most people who see their letter carrier delivering mail have no idea what it took to get out on the route. I've often wondered if our customers think we show up to work and find our mail sorted and our vehicles loaded and ready for delivery. The bulk of our work is largely a mystery to those we serve.

So when a letter carrier shows up at a doctor's office suffering a work-related injury, he or she needs to provide an accurate description of a typical workday so the doctor can make a reasonable judgment on whether specific work factors caused or aggravated an injury.

Explaining our work duties accurately is an art. Our postal lives are inundated with arcane postal terms like casing and pulling down flats. In the real world, casing is what burglars do to a place they plan to rob. Pulling down is how a basketball player captures a rebound. A flat is an apartment in New York City.

To write a good work narrative, we need to accurately describe our work in terms anyone can understand. We have to put ourselves in the shoes of the listener.

A good work narrative about a typical day at work skips such things as vehicle inspections, signing for accountables and making estimates. While those are important parts of our jobs, they have little to do with the physical work of sorting and delivering mail, the physical work that can be attributed to an injury.

A good work narrative describes a typical, eight-hour day. No two days are alike, so work duties need to be described in relative terms, like "I sort mail for about one to two hours every morning" or "I have approximately 500 possible deliveries."

While we do have heavy days where we work a lot of overtime, a good work narrative never exaggerates. The facts may be that you sort mail for an hour one day and two to three hours another day. Your route may have 500 possible deliveries, but some deliveries may be vacant or on hold. Two days are rarely alike.

The Postal Service will be given a copy of the work narrative you write and asked if it is accurate. The Postal Service has all of the facts regarding your mail volumes and work hours. That's why you should always describe a typical eight-hour day.

Besides, there's no need to exaggerate. We have a physical job and it does not take overtime to cause injuries that have developed over years of carrying mail.

A good work narrative describes the physical acts of sorting mail in the office, loading whatever equipment is

used to take the mail to your vehicle, loading the vehicle and then finally the physical act of mail delivery.

No two routes are exactly alike; however, all routes share some things in common. We all begin the day sorting mail. Most letter carriers lift a tub of mail onto a stool or shelf. Most letter carriers hold a few inches of magazines, catalogs and large envelopes (flats) in our left arm, and then grasp each piece to reach and place it into delivery order. We generally lift above shoulder level half the time.

Few people have ever stood in one place and reached as much as we do when sorting mail. Giving a simple, accurate description of sorting mail is an eye-opener for many.

Describing weights and measurements requires the same qualifiers as not every tub of flats or tray of sorted mail weighs the same. I recall once weighing a tray full of heavy catalogs that weighed more than 70 pounds. This was atypical, and would not have been appropriate for a work narrative.

However, postal regulations do require letter carriers to carry 35 pounds continuously and 70 pounds intermittently. These facts should be part of your work narrative.

"Explaining our work duties accurately is an art."

Describing street delivery is another art. What is the difference between park-and-loop and mounted delivery? Isn't dismount something one does from a horse?

A good work narrative describes mail delivery in simple sentences, like "I load my satchel with up to 35 pounds of mail. I walk from house to house with my satchel on my left shoulder, holding mail in my left arm with letters in my left hand. I grasp each address's mail with my right hand, reaching and inserting the mail into the customer's mailbox or door slot."

Our jobs require us to be in constant motion. I often think a letter carrier who is not moving is either off duty or dead. Using simple terms such as reaching, pushing, pulling, walking and climbing (stairs) can accurately paint a picture in your doctor's mind of the physical nature of a typical day's work.

Most of all, a good work narrative should be easy to read, composed of a series of short paragraphs in a large font. Doctors are busy; they don't have time to read several pages. Read your draft narrative to a non-postal friend or relative and see if they understand the nature of your work duties. A good work narrative tells the story of the physical nature of the job of a letter carrier. It may be the most important story you ever write.