

Job Description Writing Guide



NON-MANAGEMENT



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Section 1: Introduction – The Purpose of a Job Description

This guide is designed to outline information, tips and tools to help employees and managers provide clear, concise and relevant job information when preparing non-management job descriptions in the Alberta Public Service. Prior to starting the job description writing process, please review all the information contained in this guide and then let the writing begin!

WHAT IS A JOB DESCRIPTION?

Job descriptions are groupings of general responsibilities and accountabilities assigned to a position. They identify the skills, knowledge and abilities required to perform the work. They also identify a position's purpose in an organization, clearly outline the work the position is expected to perform and provide basic information about the job and its place in the organization. A job description is focused on the position itself not the incumbent/employee in the position.

WHY DO WE NEED JOB DESCRIPTIONS?

The primary purpose of job descriptions in the Alberta Public Service is to provide the necessary information to evaluate and classify jobs. The information on the job description along with other data gathered throughout the evaluation process is assessed using the Point Rating Evaluation Plan (PREP).

Job descriptions however, are also used for a number of other purposes, such as to:

- establish the job in an organizational environment;
- clearly identify what work the employee is expected to do;
- assist in recruitment and selection;
- aid in performance management;
- help clarify relationships between jobs;
- help identify learning and development;
- orient new employees;
- assist in return to work and employment accommodation initiatives; and
- match jobs in salary surveys

WHEN DOES A NEW JOB DESCRIPTION NEED TO BE WRITTEN?

Typically there are four situations that occur that generally drive the development of a new position description.

- A new job is created;
- The responsibilities of a job have changed significantly, this may be due to realignment of responsibilities, a change in the way a service is delivered etc.;
- A quality assurance review process; or
- A job is affected by an organizational restructuring.

Prior to writing a new job description, it is important to discuss with your manager or supervisor why a new job description is required. Discussions with Human Resources may also be necessary, especially if structural changes are being made. These upfront discussions help to reduce issues that may arise in the job evaluation process.

Section 2: Job Description Process

IDENTIFYING, COLLECTING AND ORGANIZING JOB INFORMATION

The hardest part of writing a job description is getting started. So to help with that we have identified 6 steps you can follow to get you up and running!

Step 1: Review the Job Description Template

- Review each section of the job description template to become familiar with the type of information required. A blank electronic copy of the Non-Management job description template can be found here: <http://www.chr.alberta.ca/Practitioners/DocList770.cfm>

Step 2: Review the Non-Management Job Description Writing Guide

- After you are familiar with the job description template you should continue to review this writing guide. The guide outlines each section of the job description and provides tips, reminders, examples and exercises to help you create clear, concise and effective responses. The last section of the guide, finishing up, also includes job description writing tips that you may want to review prior to starting on your job description.

Step 3: Begin Brainstorming Position Responsibilities

- After you have familiarized yourself with the sections of the job description, it is time to begin documenting and organizing your job information. Consider the following questions:
 - What activities is the position engaged in? (create a shopping list)
 - What are the major responsibilities of the position?
 - What are the key outcomes/objectives of the position?
 - What assistance is available and from whom?
 - With what frequency are the various major responsibilities undertaken?
- When answering the above questions you are not completing the description but rather brainstorming, ordering and documenting your thoughts. The shopping list created in the first question will be especially helpful while completing the responsibilities and activities section of the job description.

Step 4: Review Organizational Context

- Job descriptions are about individual positions, however in order to write a job description that is accurate and informative the organizational context the position works within must be taken into consideration. Organizational Charts are a common way of illustrating this.
- Organizational charts provide a visual and allow positions to be viewed in context with the complete structure. The job evaluation process is not only an evaluation and analysis of the work being performed but also an evaluation of the structure in which that work is conducted. Evaluating the structure helps to define the accountabilities of the job under review as well as other jobs in the organization. Organizational structure is a key component of the evaluation process as such it is **essential that the responsibilities, knowledge, skills etc. outlined in the job description align with where the position fits in the organizational structure.**
- Jobs rarely operate in isolation of one another so when writing a job description it is important to identify how a job interacts with others, be sure to address overlaps and ensure the organizational chart provided is reflective of the organizational context the position operates within.

Step 5: Complete the Job Description Template

- Using the job information gathered during the brainstorming step combined with the examples, exercises and tips found in this writing guide start working through each section of the job description template. Remember you don't have to complete the template in the order it is laid out. It is however recommended that you have identified the key responsibility statements before moving on to the knowledge, skills, abilities and scope sections as these should connect back to the key responsibilities identified.

Step 6: Finalize and Double check

- Before signing off on a job description it is always a good idea to set it aside for a couple of days and re-read it with a fresh mind. During your re-read make sure to ask yourself whether someone outside of your work unit would understand the responsibilities, knowledge etc. being described. It may also be useful to have someone unfamiliar with the position take a read and provide you with feedback.

Section 3: Completing the Non-Management Job Description Form

The Government of Alberta has two job description forms one for non-management positions and one for management positions. This section of the guide is specific to the sections included in the non-management job description template. These include:

- Identification
- Purpose
- Responsibilities and Activities
- Scope
- Knowledge, Skills and Abilities
- Contacts
- Supervision Exercised
- Changes Since Last Classification Review; and
- Organization Chart
- Signatures

In many organizations job descriptions are task oriented, they sum up all tasks that the incumbent of the job has to accomplish. The GOA's job description format is intended to be results oriented focusing on the core contributions of the position, resulting in a shorter and more focused job description. With this in mind when filling out each of the sections identified above it is essential to focus on the core contributions of the position generally this means 80-90% of the job will be covered by the job description.

IDENTIFICATION

To identify jobs properly for systems and records purposes, specific identification information is required (working title, name, position number, reports to position, division, branch, ministry, etc). This information is often referred to as the tombstone data. All of this information is important so please ensure all areas are filled in. If a reclassification is being requested the requested class box should be filled in. If you are uncertain as to what stream and level would be appropriate take some time to have a conversation with your Human Resource Consultant - don't just submit the job description with this section blank.

PURPOSE

The purpose section is a summary statement identifying the overall purpose of the job in the organization.

- Describe why this job exists within the organization, what the purpose of the job is and how it delivers upon its responsibilities - state the reasons clearly and concisely in two or three sentences.
- The purpose section is like the executive summary of the job description.
- This statement should not be a restating of the key responsibilities of the job.

- Since this is the first section of the job description, the reader should be able to obtain a quick picture of the job.
- This statement should assist the reader in distinguishing this job from others and identify its overall purpose within the organization.

EXAMPLES:

Head Librarian

The Head Librarian ensures the delivery of quality library services and products through the effective coordination of human, financial and technological resources and within government policies and procedures, approved budgets and recognized library standards and practices, in support of the information requirements of the nine ministries that are served and in line with Service Alberta policies and goals.

Records Coordinator

Reporting to the Service Delivery Unit Supervisor, this position classifies and maintains a records classification system by providing consistency, improving control of and accessibility to government business records thereby enabling their clients to better meet their administrative, operational, legal, and accountability requirements of their business. This ensures the effective creation, maintenance and disposition of records.

Administrative Assistant

Reporting to the Executive Director, the Administrative Assistant provides the full complement of administrative services to the Executive Director and coordinates administrative standards and correspondence across the Branch by effectively communicating with staff and following applicable ministry policies and procedures. This ensures that the Executive Director and Branch Managers are appropriately supported and that action requests are completed on time

HELPFUL HINTS AND REMINDERS!

- Unless you have a clear picture of the purpose of the job when you start writing, this section may be easier to prepare after the job description is finished.
- It may be helpful to start this section off by stating the organizational context of the job (e.g. works as a part of a team, region/head office, etc.).
- Remember this section is like the executive summary of your job description. Focus on highlighting the key functions/purpose of the role but leave the details for the sections to come.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT!

Take a moment and consider why your job exists; jot down the first few thoughts that come to mind. Focusing on those key functions, create a draft purpose statement illustrating to the reader the purpose of the position.

RESPONSIBILITIES AND ACTIVITIES

This is the most important section of the job description as it highlights the key responsibilities and activities of the job.

Start this section off by grouping together the activities you worked on during your brain storming. Each grouping of activities should be supported by a responsibility statement and each responsibility statement should strive to answer the following three questions:

- What is the job required to do? What action or work is performed?
- How is the work done? Does the job interact with people, data or things?
- Why must it be done? What is the end result or purpose of the activity?

EXAMPLES:

Head Librarian

(what) Ensure the development and coordination of cost-effective and easily accessible library services and products **(why)** are aligned with the strategic plans of Service Alberta and client ministries **(how)** by:

- ▶ Developing, implementing and regularly evaluating library policies and procedures.
- ▶ Developing an library operational plan and co-coordinating it with ministries' business plans.
- ▶ Conducting client need assessments and satisfaction surveys.
- ▶ Providing input to the ministries served about library services and products.
- ▶ Following Service Alberta budget guidelines, providing input to the budget process and monitoring expenditures on an ongoing basis.
- ▶ Analyzing and preparing statistical reports on library services.

Records Coordinator

(what) Analyzes and determines content of business documents, selects appropriate place under which to file into record keeping system, and assigns appropriate record codes to the documents for subsequent filing and retrieval **(why)** to ensure compliance with records policies and ease of records access for clients **(how)** by:

- ▶ Receiving and sorting of incoming correspondence.
- ▶ Completing and necessary cross-referencing.
- ▶ Checking for duplicate copies of information.
- ▶ Updating the file plan and related indexes/thesaurus.
- ▶ Maintaining the master file plan manual and distributing updates to clients.
- ▶ Using electronic systems associated with the classification of business records.

Administrative Assistant

(what) Ministerial and Deputy Minister action requests and Branch briefings are coordinated and administered **(why)** to ensure responses are addressed and provided in a timely and coordinated manner **(how)** by:

- ▶ Coordinating Branch responses to action requests.
- ▶ Gathering information from various sources and researching background material prior to assigning action requests to the appropriate unit.
- ▶ Tracking and monitoring the status of responses and briefings.
- ▶ Ensuring deadlines are clearly communicated and providing follow-up and reminders
- ▶ Ensuring that copies of approved and completed correspondence are returned to the appropriate area and filed.
- ▶ Disseminating information pertaining to procedures and formatting to ARTS users in the Branch.

HELPFUL HINTS AND REMINDERS!

- The list of responsibility and activity statements should be sequenced by order of importance, that is, the most important duty/responsibility for which the job exists in the organization should be first.
- Responsibilities typically number anywhere from 4 to 8, and should fully inform readers/evaluators why the information provided is a necessary part of the job. After each responsibility statement include 3 to 6 activities representing the “how” as seen in the above examples.
- Begin each responsibility and activity with an active verb and use the current tense or the "ing" ending, e.g., Monitoring lab tests by....., Processing documents by
- **All material in the job description should reflect the regular requirements of the job, that is, the routine, regular duties and responsibilities of the job, not things that might happen, or rare occurrences; material should not include responsibilities described as "May be required ..."; the job either does the duty or doesn't.**
- Use your brainstorming list to group common activities into overarching responsibility statements that illustrate *the What, How and Why* of the responsibility.
- Provide examples when possible.
- Ensure linkages between the responsibility/activity statements and the information you describe in subsequent sections of the job description e.g. Knowledge, Skills & Abilities section.
- Beware of verbs that fail to convey the actual actions undertaken by the job, unless they are accompanied by enough detail to explain the what, why and how of the actions taking place, e.g. avoid or expand on “maintain”, “facilitate”, “assist”, “participate”, “coordinates”; if you have to use them follow them with “by...

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT!

Take a moment and create a shopping list of activities the position is engaged in:

Working with the shopping list created above; group the activities into main responsibility areas. Using one grouping of activities create a responsibility statement identifying the What, Why and How (activities):

SCOPE

The Scope section provides additional information on the challenges, problem solving and creativity requirements and decision making capacity of the position. It is factual, descriptive information that illustrates what internal or external areas the position impacts as well as the diversity and complexity of the position.

This section should include:

- Internal and external areas impacted by the job
- Size and variety of projects, programs, services delivered or supported by the job
- Nature of problems, issues and situation encountered
- Guidelines, precedents and procedures available
- Amount of independence within the job

When describing the scope of the job it is helpful to ask/answer the following questions:

- What are the typical problems/issues faced regularly in the job and what is the difficulty of these?
- How does the job respond to/resolve these problems/issues?
- Who do these problems/issues impact (internally & externally)?
- What is the variety of problems and what level of solution already exists within the position or is creative thinking required? (E.g. Does the position has readily available assistance in the form of documented procedures, guidelines or precedence?)

EXAMPLES:

Head Librarian

The position provides services in line with Service Alberta and Government of Alberta Library goals and policies.

Reporting to the Director, Library Services, the position is responsible and accountable for the provision of library services and for the quality and timeliness of the information and resources provided and available to the ministries that are served by the library.

Information needs vary greatly and requests for information are received from all levels both within and external to the ministries.

The position is responsible for the day to day operation of the library and develops, analyzes and implements initiatives for library services and products in a professional, customer service oriented and competent manner.

Records Coordinator

Reporting to the Senior Records Analyst, the position follows a framework of established policies and procedures while developing/maintaining and updating the records management classification systems. This work has a direct impact on their client's ability to access and manage records. The position must also evaluate workloads, evaluate change and provide creative and flexible alternatives to meet changing goals. Non-routine problems are referred to a supervisor.

Administrative Assistant

The position works with minimal supervision within the parameter of established ministry and government administrative policies, processes and procedures. It impacts the Branch through the streamlining of information with and beyond the Executive Director's office. Failure to successfully perform responsibilities can result in errors and delays in responses to action requests and adversely affect operations of the office.

Identifying administrative issues and recommending new and improved administrative solutions and standards pose challenges in terms of influencing decisions and obtaining consensus and commitment from all areas of the Branch. The position works closely with the ADM's office and branch representatives to establish new administrative procedures and resolve general administrative and operational issues.

HELPFUL HINTS AND REMINDERS!

- Provide examples of the kinds of problems dealt with independently and the kinds of problems referred to the supervisor.
- Provide examples of the specific resources available (e.g. office procedures and guidelines, legislation, government/ministry policies, administrative procedures) to do the job.
- Be specific about how the work is checked – is it checked while in progress or after it has been completed? Is the work completed on site or off site without regular supervision?
- When stating examples make sure they are consistent with the rest of the job description and link back to the responsibilities and accountabilities identified earlier.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT!

Take a moment and consider a typical challenge faced by your position. Focusing on that challenge, develop a draft scope statement identifying what the challenge is, how it is addressed and the intended outcome.

KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND ABILITIES

The knowledge, skills and abilities required for the job may be acquired either through experience, on-the-job training or formal learning. It is important to note this section is meant to identify the knowledge, skills and abilities the position needs for competent job performance not the knowledge, skills, abilities and/or specialized training the incumbent possesses.

In this section describe all areas of knowledge, skills and abilities required to perform the job, including knowledge of computers and information technology; procedures, mathematics; administrative, technical, or professional techniques and procedures; technical/scientific or program-related processes.

Describe these three aspects of the knowledge and understanding required by the job:

- What knowledge is required, (theoretical, technical, administrative or knowledge of directives, guidelines, policies, methods, techniques, procedures, sections of collective agreements, legislative authorities, etc).

- Why it is required (i.e. to do what?)
- How it is applied (i.e. by doing what?)

EXAMPLES:**Head Librarian**

(what) This position requires a Masters in Library and Information Science Degree **(why)** in order to provide theoretically sound advice and guidance **(how)** focused on the acquisition, referencing, cataloging and archiving of information resources for government usage.

(what) The position requires an awareness and knowledge of issues, trends and research in key subject areas appropriate to the businesses of their client ministries **(why)** in order to provide them with appropriate information resources **(how)** by discussing information needs with the ministries, scanning available resources and acquiring them.

Records Coordinator

(what) The position requires knowledge of records management policies/procedures, acts and related legislation gained through a certificate program in records management and on the job training, **(why)** to provide records management services to their clients **(how)** by developing and updating the records management system.

Administrative Assistant

(what) The position requires knowledge of ministry correspondence and action request programs and procedures **(why)** in order to effectively coordinate action requests within the Branch **(how)** by researching, assigning, monitoring and transferring relevant information amongst Branch and Division staff.

(what) The position requires strong communication skills **(why)** to ensure smooth and uninterrupted operations within the branch and unit **(how)** to meet identified timelines and requirements.

HELPFUL HINTS AND REMINDERS!

- Ask yourself if you won the lottery and were in charge of hiring your replacement what knowledge, experience and education would you be recruiting to?
- Ensure the what, why and how are addressed in each knowledge statement but ESPECIALLY where it would not be obvious to the reader.
- Do NOT just state the minimum recruitment standards for the classification level associated with the position.
- Be specific when describing the use of computers or specialized programs so evaluators know how advanced the knowledge required is.
- For knowledge of legislation, policies, or regulations indicate whether all or only some parts or aspects must be known and the specific reasons they must be known ‘...to direct queries, respond to requests for information, identify and compare impact of different...’.
- When describing a skill do not use evaluative terms or adjectives, e.g. “job requires superior communication skills” – examples of the use of the skill are better indicators.
- Be sure to link information in this section back to the key responsibilities and accountabilities identified earlier.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT!

Take a moment and consider the What, Why and How for a critical knowledge, skill or ability of the position.

CONTACTS

This section identifies who the job communicates with and the purpose for that communication. The contacts section should attempt to answer the following two questions:

- What are the nature, frequency, level and purpose of regular contacts made by the job both internally and externally?
- What committees, tasks forces, etc. does the incumbent serve on in the course of his/her work and in what capacity (member for input, chair)?

EXAMPLES:**Head Librarian**

Interact daily with library clients from nine ministries for the purposes of providing information as requested and marketing library services.

Records Coordinator

Position works with the Executive Office staff daily to ensure that all documents are properly classified in order for the clients to be able to retrieve those documents and to explain the records management process.

Administrative Assistant

Daily contact with the ADMs office to respond to information requests, exchange information and resolve administrative issues.

HELPFUL HINTS AND REMINDERS!

- Remember don't just identify who the contact is but also the purpose/nature of the communication.
- If and when possible link the purpose of the communication to the responsibility/activity statement it applies to.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT!

Take a moment and consider an internal or external contact the position has regular interaction with. Identify the frequency of contact and the main purpose for communication.

SUPERVISION EXERCISED

This section does not apply to all positions, however, if supervision is a component of the position include: class titles, working titles and the position numbers of all positions directly supervised. Otherwise state Not Applicable.

EXAMPLES:**Head Librarian**

Program Services 3 - Reference Librarian (00020453)

Information & Creative Technical Services 3 – Library Technician (00008629)

Information & Creative Technical Services 3 – Library Technician (00012986)

Administrative Support 3 – Library Clerk (wages)

Records Coordinator

Not Applicable.

Administrative Assistant

Not Applicable.

HELPFUL HINTS AND REMINDERS!

- Only include the positions in this section that the job has full supervisory responsibilities for. This generally means the position is responsible for the assignment and evaluation of work as well as performance management up to and including the disciplinary process.
- If supervision is a component of the role this section should not be the only mention of it, be sure to link the supervisory responsibilities of the job throughout the job description where appropriate.

CHANGES SINCE LAST CLASSIFICATION REVIEW

This section is meant to include any significant changes that have impacted the responsibilities and activities assigned to the position. It is also a good idea to briefly identify any effect the changes may have had on the scope, knowledge skills and abilities and contacts of the positions. If the job description is simply being updated and no significant changes have occurred this section can be left blank.

HELPFUL HINTS AND REMINDERS!

- This is often an important section of the job description when a position is being brought forward for evaluation.
- Remember to highlight those areas that have changed and link them back to the sections of the job description where they are described in more detail. This can simply be done by identifying the section, bullet and page number.

ORGANIZATION CHART

An up-to-date organizational chart is an essential part of a job description and must be included as part of the job description submission. It should include the position's supervisor, the supervisor's supervisor and the position's peers and subordinates. For additional information on organization charts and organization context please refer to Step 4 of Section 2 (page 3 of the Guide).

SIGNATURES

The final requirement in a job description is the Manager and Division Director or ADM's signatures. This certifies that the job is accurately described and reflects the work required in the organization. You may recall that earlier it was indicated the purpose of a job description was to:

- clearly identify the work the position is expected to perform
- identify the skills, knowledge and/or competencies required to perform the work
- establish the job in an organizational environment

Management's signature certifies the above and reinforces that they have reviewed and agree with the contents and the description of the position.

SECTION 5: FINISHING UP!

Before you finish up and sign off on the position description review, the tips below. If you have taken all of these into consideration your job description is sure to be a success!

JOB DESCRIPTION WRITING TIPS

- ✓ Relax! Many people are concerned when faced with the task of completing a job description. They believe they are not an expert writer or job analyst and therefore will not do a good job. Don't worry, just describe the job as you see it. The description has been designed to gather the relevant information required for job evaluation.
- ✓ Describe the job as it exists today, not in the past or in the future.
- ✓ Do not use subjective, evaluative or performance laden words or terms such as *difficult, efficient, comprehensive, complex, extensive, or excellent, thorough, superior, progressively responsible*.
- ✓ Illustrate job information with actual examples which give the reader a clear picture of the job and help with the evaluation.
- ✓ Review position overlaps, ensure sufficient distinction between positions (such as co-workers, supervisors, etc) to show for clear authority and accountability in the job.
- ✓ Beware of verbs that fail to describe actual actions performed by the job, unless enough detail is provided to explain why and how the actions are used, e.g. avoid 'assist', 'facilitate', 'participate', 'coordinates'. If you have to use them, explain clearly what the job actually does, for example – Position assists the policy committee by distributing new policies for review by affected interested groups gathering the responses and collating the suggestions by category for the committee to review.
- ✓ Avoid words that are subject to varying interpretations, e.g. *supports, co-ordinates, may help, deals with, as required*, as they are unclear and can lessen the responsibility that the job actually has.
- ✓ Remember, the job will be read by someone whose field of study is different than yours - use plain, simple language and stay away from jargon, technical terms and abbreviations (unless you define them).
- ✓ Spell acronyms out the first time they are used, e.g. ARTS – Action Request Tracking System.
- ✓ Be concise! Ensure that every phrase and word contributes to the reader's understanding. If there is excess information, the important points may be lost. If a statement does not add to the reader's knowledge, leave it out, change it or add an example.
- ✓ Remember to focus on the main functions of the job. If the main focus of the position is information technology the job description shouldn't be dominated by the human resource responsibilities of the position.
- ✓ Remember to review the organizational structure in which the position operates. Be sure that the responsibilities, knowledge, skills etc. outlined in the job description align with where the position fits in the organizational structure.
- ✓ Do not assume that there is a direct relationship between the length of the job description and job size, because this assumption is false. It is not the length of the job description but the quality of information that determines its usefulness for job evaluation purposes. The longer the job description, the more difficult it is to distinguish between core and non-core elements.
- ✓ Before signing the job description set aside and read it again in a couple of days with a fresh mind, or better yet has someone not familiar with your position review it and provide you with feedback.