



# Society for Effective Lessons Learned Sharing (SELLS)

## Lessons Learned Writing Tips

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This fact sheet is part of a collection developed by SELLS to support Department of Energy and National Nuclear Security Agency Lessons Learned Programs.

### Introduction

Lessons learned documents should communicate operating experiences that can be acted upon to improve the safety, security, and effectiveness of DOE/NNSA operations.

How well your documents help readers learn the lesson is largely dependant on how the documents are written. Effective writing involves proper mechanics like grammar and punctuation as well as organization and formatting.

Research has shown that readers skim business-related documents for headers and other formatting cues that will quickly tell them what the document is about. E-mail documents must pass an even tougher hurdle. Readers evaluate the subject line to decide if they want to skim the actual message.

Readers want it short and sweet - to the point with the minimum complexity necessary to accurately convey the message. The following tips are intended to help you write quality lessons learned documents. These tips supplement the guidance for the Lessons Learned Template in [DOE-STD-7501-99](#), *The DOE Corporate Lessons Learned Program*, and reflect the experience of lessons learned professionals from across the DOE/NNSA. They are not intended to constrain the individual author.

### Preparing a Lesson Learned Document

For each lessons learned you document, consider the following questions:

#### Who is the audience?

- Who will get the information?
- How will they use it?
- When will they use it?
- Where will they use it?

Managers may need an entirely different type of lessons learned document than field workers. If the lessons learned information needs to be communicated to a diverse audience, you may need to develop several different documents.

#### How will it be used?

Will the lessons learned information be used during a management walkaround or a tailgate briefing, or will a work planner be incorporating the information into a work package? Is your target audience primarily in an office setting, or will you need to post your lessons learned in the cafeteria to reach them?

#### Is the information time sensitive?

Do the recommended actions need to be completed within a specific timeframe? Can the information to be distributed from a quarterly assessment or is timeliness an issue?

#### What action(s) should the reader take?

- Do you want to increase the reader's knowledge on the topic?

- Do you want the individual reader to implement the recommended actions?
- Do you want the facility/site to implement the recommended actions if applicable?

Your recommendations should identify who should act as well as what actions can be taken to adopt/adapt a good work practice or prevent the recurrence of an undesirable event.

#### What information should be included in the document?

Documents primarily transmit explicit knowledge, or knowledge that can be conveyed in specifications, procedures, and standards.

Readers will translate the information presented in your document to create meaningful links between the information and its application to their job tasks and/or specific work environments.

Focus on the situation/event in which the lesson was learned. Background details and process explanation are not necessary for readers who are performing similar tasks and have the technical expertise/skills and common language to understand the lesson.

Readers who cannot understand the lesson without detailed background information are very unlikely to be able to use the lesson.

Provide knowledgeable points of contact so that readers can gain additional knowledge, if necessary, through dialogue and/or personal interaction.

## General Writing Tips

Avoid the use of local nicknames, individuals' names, and site-specific acronyms unless they are critical to understanding the event.

Minimize the use of acronyms and spell them out on their first appearance, if used.

Write in conversational language using active verbs. Readers learn best from external experiences that are conveyed as stories.

If the information is preliminary, tell the reader and provide additional updates and information when available.

Check reporting systems for similar events that might indicate a trend.

Verify the sensitivity of the information. Obtain classification reviews if applicable.

Include citations to regulations, consensus standards or DOE orders that relate to the lessons learned.

Ensure that all individuals listed as points of contact have confirmed their contact information and given permission for their name to be listed in the document.

Validate the factual accuracy of the information and ensure that all necessary reviews are completed.

If you are distributing the information through the DOE Lessons Learned List Server, ensure that an appropriate priority descriptor, unique identifier, and other required information is included in the lessons learned.

## Updates

If you are posting an update to a lessons learned that was previously distributed on the DOE Lessons Learned List Server, use the same unique identifier followed by "Rev. 1" or "Updated mm/dd/yyyy". Also delineate any information that has been learned since the lessons learned

was originally posted. Marking additions in red text works well for minor changes. That makes the changes stand out but may detract from the readability of the document if large sections have been modified. A brief summary of the changes at the beginning of the document can be used to summarize extensive modifications.

## Need Help?

The Society for Effective Lessons Learned Sharing (SELLS) has established a network of lessons learned mentors who may be contacted for assistance with developing effective lessons learned documents. See the Fact Sheet titled [Lessons Learned Mentoring](#) for more information on obtaining assistance.

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Lessons Learned Program Fact Sheets, by the Society for Effective Lessons Learned Sharing (SELLS), are available from the DOE Lessons Learned Web Site:  
<http://tis.eh.doe.gov/ll/sells/faq.html>

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