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From: STUDENT  
Subject: Informational Investigative Report  
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The purpose of this informational investigative report is to present my research concerning technical communications in veterinary medicine and the conclusions I have drawn from it.

### **Introductions and Objectives**

As a hopeful small animal veterinarian, I was interested in learning about the types of technical writing done in veterinary medicine. I found a great deal of information that gave me a new perspective on the importance of writing in this field. This report presents the methods, findings, and conclusions of my research concerning this kind of writing and others that veterinarians often do. Any hopeful veterinarian could learn a great deal about the types of writing they will do from the information in this report.

### **Research Methods**

In order to find out what kind of writing is done in veterinary medicine, I began researching online. First, I gathered general information about the field of veterinary medicine and the career of practicing as a small animal veterinarian. For this kind of information, I mostly used reputable veterinary websites. I then researched writing typically done in that profession specifically. I found an article from the Journal of Technical Writing and Communication through the Baylor Library database that examined the different types of writing commonly done in veterinary medicine. On the Veterinary Support Personnel Network website, I found an article laying out instructions for writing medical records, one of the most important and frequently used forms of written communication in veterinary medicine.

Second, I conducted a phone interview with Dr. Phillip Elmer, a small animal veterinarian practicing in Houston, Texas. Dr. Elmer completed his veterinary degree at Texas A&M and has over 20 years of experience in his career. I focused my questions on the types and processes of writing in his field.

Finally, I collected two samples of writing done on a daily basis in this field from Dr. Elmer. I carefully read and analyzed them for common patterns and defining characteristics. I then drew both broad and specific conclusions on the writing done in veterinary medicine and on the values of this field in general.

### **Findings**

A small animal veterinarian is typically responsible for performing routine checkups and vaccinations, diagnosing diseases and prescribing medication, cleaning and managing wounds, and performing surgeries. A veterinarian may also need to draw blood, perform diagnostic tests, and take X-Rays of their patients (Cramer). Because of the amount of time veterinarians must spend treating patients, they cannot devote much time to writing in a day. One of Dr. Elmer's main tips for writing in veterinary medicine is "keep it brief", and he estimated that he spends two or three total hours a day writing.

These time constraints are evident in the format and brevity of many veterinary documents. I will examine medical records as an example.

Medical records are the most important form of writing that veterinarians do. Dr. Elmer estimated that 95% of the writing he does is maintaining medical records. These records enable veterinary doctors or technicians within a clinic to exchange or refer back to information about the medical history of a pet. Occasionally, they will be sent to outside veterinary medical personnel in the instance of a referral. Veterinary doctors and technicians use these medical records when examining a patient to help diagnose problems and devise a safe and effective treatment for the pet.

Any exam, treatment, test, or prescription for a patient must be written in that patient's medical record. As a result, many veterinarians, intersperse writing between treating patients. Dr. Elmer has found that it is best to update records as soon as he examines or treats a patient. He explained "It's better to not let it all pile up". In addition, the exam or treatment is fresh in his mind if he uses this method. These records are usually kept on a computer, and each document has a ready-to-use template in an effort to save time.

According to Dr. Elmer and the Veterinary Support Personnel Network website, the template for recording information after exams is called the "SOAP" template. The letters in SOAP respectively stand for subjective, objective, assessment, and plan. The subjective heading typically covers the owner's subjective complaint. For instance, on one medical record under "subjective" a technician wrote "owner would like diag[nosis] and x-rays if ok" (Holly 8). Objective information is number heavy. It usually includes information such as temperature and heart rate. It also includes a listing of all the body systems and the veterinarian's observations concerning any possible problems within that system. Assessment includes the veterinarian's general conclusions concerning the pet's health, or any diagnoses that have been made. Finally, the plan section lays out a treatment for the diagnosis in the assessment section. All of this writing is notational and relies heavily on abbreviations and acronyms. For instance, Dr. Elmer wrote on one of Holly's exam records "The chest rad looks WNL," meaning that the chest radiograph, or X-Ray, is within normal limits (Holly 9).

These exam records are added to the larger whole of the patient's medical record. This record includes prescriptions, test results, and vaccinations in addition to exam records. Like the exam record, the format of the medical record is also generally notational, using many abbreviations and incomplete sentences. For instance, the abbreviation "YRLYC" is used for "Yearly Canine Exam" (Rusty 1). The patient's general information, including name, species, breed, color, date of birth, age and sex is listed in the top, along with the owner's information. Just under that are current warnings and reminders concerning the pet's treatments. The bulk of the document is the history. Along with exam records, the treatments are listed in chronological order, and the dates the pet received the treatments are listed to the right. The results of different diagnostic and check-up tests are also listed out in bullet format. The information on medical records is often numerical. Numbers are needed to describe test results, dosage and frequency of medication administrations, weight, age, and dates. Overall, the tone is scientific but informal. For instance,

under “Warning” a technician has written “BEST DOG EVER EVER EVER” in Holly’s medical record (Holly 1).

While medical records definitely make up the bulk of a veterinarian’s writing, small animal veterinarians do occasionally partake in other forms of writing as well. Isabelle Thompson investigated the technical communications veterinarians often performed and found that veterinarians are often in situations that require them to communicate patient health issues and instructions to colleagues, clients or staff. Accordingly, they must write referral letters, emails, and instructions on a daily basis (Thompson, Hendrix 108). After medical records, Dr. Elmer focused most on referral letters as an important part of writing on the job.

As it is meant to be used outside a clinic, referral letters are more formal than medical records. These documents allow veterinarians to transfer patients to external healthcare providers that may be able to better see to their needs. For instance, Dr. Elmer might send a patient to a veterinary ophthalmologist if there is a very specific problem with a patient’s eyes. These letters resemble most any professional letter, containing the proper heading, salutation, body, and summary if necessary.

Time constraints are also evident in the types of revisions a veterinarian often makes. Dr. Elmer explained that as a medical record is a legal document, it should never be revised. A veterinarian should enter the information and never edit the work. Referral letters require some revision but not much. Dr. Elmer explained that he typically rereads his letters to evaluate clarity and catch grammatical errors before he sends them. Other than that there is not much editing and revision to be done.

## **Conclusions**

Through my research I was able to draw some conclusions about writing in this field and what is valued in the work of a veterinarian in general. It is apparent through their methods and style of writing that time is a significant issue for veterinarians. Every aspect of a veterinarian’s writing speaks to the fact that time is precious. Their documents are brief, and especially in the case of medical records, heavy in abbreviations and acronyms. It is apparent that both writers and readers in this field value quick access and easy readability. Furthermore, veterinary medicine is, of course, part of the health care field. Therefore, writers and readers in the veterinary field place great emphasis on medical terminology. Medical acronyms, medications, and terms for medical tests are expected to be understood in any kind of writing in veterinary medicine. Finally, as part of the scientific community, writers and readers in the veterinary field value objectivity and scientific information. This is evident in the amount of numerical information in the medical records.

Overall, these documents allow the medical personnel to exchange information that will allow them to care for their patient efficiently. Learning how to read and write them is essential to a prospective veterinarian’s future career. This research has been highly valuable to me and my understanding of one of the most important parts of working in veterinary medicine.

## References

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## Appendix List

1. Notes from interview with Dr. Elmer
2. Sample Document- Medical Record for Holly
3. Sample Document- Medical Record for Rusty