



THE WRIGHT WAY

by Peter Wright, Esq. and Pamela Darr Wright, MA, MSW

■ Good records are essential to effective advocacy. In this article, you will learn how to use logs, calendars, journals, and letters to create a paper trail, clarify events, document problems, and what you were told. Train yourself to write things down! By writing things down when they happen, you are taking steps to protect your child's interests.

Keep a log or record of your contacts with the school. Your log should include telephone calls and meetings, conversations, and correspondence between you and school personnel. If you have a dispute with the school, your contact log is independent evidence that supports your memory. Make your requests in writing. Write polite follow-up letters to document events, discussions, and meetings.

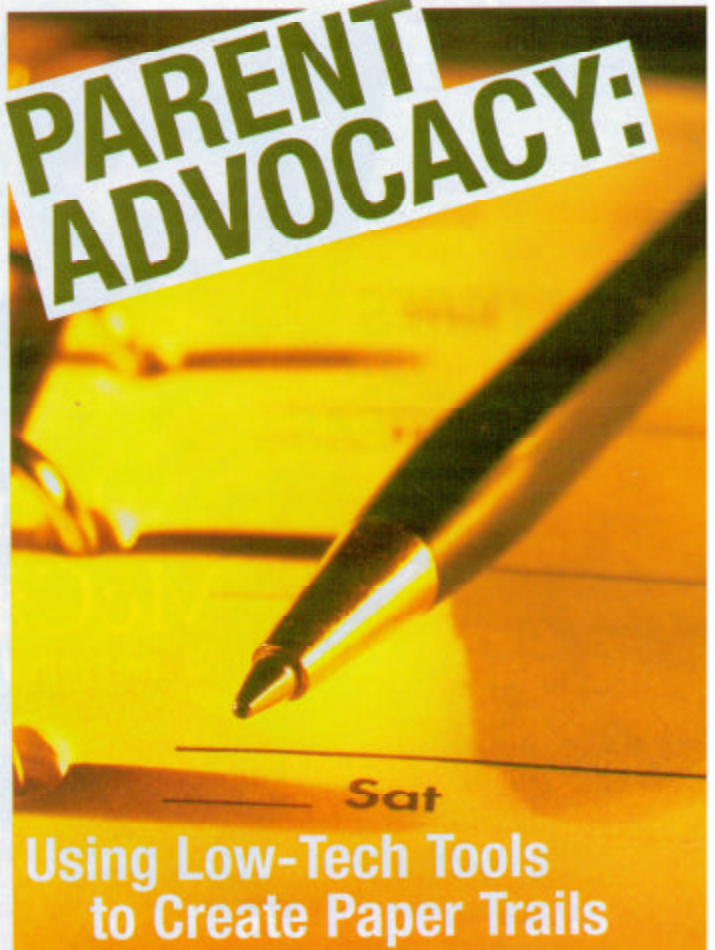
When you write a letter, think about what you want your letter to accomplish. What do you want? Edit your letters so they make a good impression. When you write a letter, think about the decision-making Stranger who has the power to make things right (superintendent, school district officials, teachers).

Documents that support your position are a key to resolving disputes early. Your tools are simple:

- Logs
- Calendars
- Journals

Be sure to keep copies of all letters, reports, and consent forms. For additional information about how to keep records and organize your child's file, read "Organizing Your Child's Special Education File: Do It Right!" in the June/July 2007 issue of *Spectrum*.

PARENT ADVOCACY:



Using Low-Tech Tools to Create Paper Trails

DOCUMENTS SUPPORT MEMORIES & TESTIMONY

As Pete says, "If a statement is not written down, it was not said." If you have a dispute with the school, assume that you will testify about your recollections. Memories are unreliable and are strongly influenced by emotions. If your problem boils down to your word against the word of a school employee, you are unlikely to prevail without proper documentation.

However, if your recollections are supported by a journal, contact log or calendar that describes the problem or event, your position is stronger. Your journal or log should be contemporaneous—that is, written when the events or incidents occurred.

If you can produce a letter that describes what the school agreed to do or refused to do, your position will be stronger. If the school asks you to sign a consent or permission form, get a copy for your records. Your copy establishes what you agreed to.

DOCUMENTS ANSWER QUESTIONS

Documents provide answers to "Who, What, Why, When, Where, How and Explain" questions.

- What services or supports did the school agree to provide?
- What services or supports did the school refuse to provide?
- What reasons did the school give for their refusal?
- Who attended the meeting when these decisions were made?
- Why was the parent not advised about this meeting?
- When was this meeting held?
- When did the parent receive the IEP in the mail?
- When did the school inform the parent about this change in program and placement?
- Explain how the new IEP was implemented.

••• YOUR CALENDAR •••

Many parents like to record their appointments in a monthly or "Year at a Glance" calendar. Calendars provide good evidence about meeting dates and times. If you document meeting dates and times in a calendar, write a description of what happened at the meeting in your journal or log.

Tip! Do not throw your calendar away at the end of the year!

••• Your Journal •••

Your journal is like a diary and should be clear and legible. If you request a due process hearing, your writings, journals, logs, calendars, and letters may be subpoenaed by the school district and used as evidence in your child's case.

Assume that school personnel and their attorney will read your journal and other documents. Stick to the facts. Do not use the journal to describe your feelings and frustrations. When you write an entry in your journal, write to the Stranger who has the power to fix problems.

What you can take from this is learning to document your conversations, meetings, and other events with school personnel. You learned how to use low-tech tools—logs, journals, and calendars to create paper trails. You learned how to use the Problem Report worksheet to document ongoing problems with the school.

As you describe events, concerns and problems, remember the powerful decision-making Stranger who has the power to grant your requests.

••• Additional Resources •••

The Art of Writing Letters by Pam Wright teaches you about two approaches to letter writing, the Blame Approach and the Story-Telling Approach. You will learn the differences between business letters and therapeutic letters, and why you should never send therapeutic letters to the school.

<http://www.wrightslaw.com/advoc/articles/letters.dr.aft.htm>

In *12 Rules for Writing Great Letters*, you learn how to write letters that make a good impression and get positive results. Learn how to use letters to request information, request action, provide information or describe an event, decline a request, and express appreciation.

http://www.wrightslaw.com/advoc/articles/12rules_letters.htm

In *Writing a "Letter to the Stranger,"* you learn that strangers often make decisions about your child's special education program. What impression will your letters make? Will the Stranger view you as an angry, negative complainer? Or will the Stranger see you as a rational parent who is expressing valid concerns? Who is the Stranger? How does he or she think?

Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy, 2nd Edition, by Pam and Pete Wright. Chapters 23 and 24 teach you how to write powerful evidence letters and persuasive "Letters to the Stranger." These chapters also include sample letters that you can tailor to your circumstances.

YOUR CONTACT LOG

Use a log to document all contacts between you and the school. Your contact log should include telephone calls, messages, meetings, conversations, letters, and notes between you and the school staff. Table 1 shows a sample contact log entry for phone calls.

Contact log entry for a telephone call

Who	Person's name, title, phone number
When	Date, time, place of contact
What you wanted	A few words about the purpose of the call
What you were told	A short description of what you were told
Notes	Other information that is important or useful

Your log is a memory aid that will help you remember what happened and why. Your log is a record of:

- Whom you met or talked with
- When the contact occurred
- What you wanted
- What you were told

In Table 2, you see a contact log entry for a phone call from a parent to the school.

Contact log entry for telephone call from parent to school.

Who	Emily Jones, Guidance counselor. 555-1212
When	1/30/08 @ 9:15 a.m.
What you wanted	Information about accommodations Mark will receive when he takes the state achievement test next week.
What you were told	Mrs. Jones will put this information in an envelope. I will pick it up at the school after 4 pm tomorrow.
Notes	

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You can use your contact log to document problems too. Table 3 demonstrates how you can describe a problem in your log.

Contact log entry of telephone call about suspension from school.

Who	Dr. Matthews, Assistant Principal. 555-0101
When	2/26/08 @ 10:15 a.m.
What you wanted	Left message on my office voice-mail to advise that he suspended Chris from school again.
What you were told	Did not speak with him directly. I called him at school 3 times today but he did not return my calls.
Notes	This is 3rd suspension in 2 weeks.

You can use your contact log to document meetings, what you were told during meetings, and other conversations with school personnel.

Contact log entry documenting a request and the response.

Who	Meeting with Mrs. Smith, social studies teacher, about Joey's grades and need for accommodations.
When	2/12/08 at 3:30 p.m.
What you wanted	I want the teacher to provide the accommodations in Joey's IEP.
What you were told	Teacher is stressed b/c she has 15 sp. ed. kids and no instructional aide. Believes accommodations are unfair to other kids.
Notes	Joey failed social studies in last grading period.

Your Problem Report Worksheet

Do you have frequent or ongoing problems with the school – frequent suspensions, homework problems, teacher problems? You can use the Problem Report worksheet to document ongoing school problems. *If you have several Problem Reports about the same issue, this is evidence that your child's program or placement is not appropriate.*

PROBLEM REPORT WORKSHEET

Date: ____/____/____
Month Date Year

Problem: _____

People involved: _____

Facts (5 Ws + H + E)

What happened?

When did it happen?

Who was involved?

Where did it happen?

Why did it happen?

Who witnessed?

What action did school take?

What action did you take?

Other facts:
