



# The Art and Science of OER Writing

By LT Russell Mayer, PSC-rpm-1

Time and again, officers are reminded of the importance of the Officer Evaluation Report (OER) on their career. An accurate and timely performance evaluation is critical to aid the Coast Guard with personnel management decisions (promotions, assignments, etc). It is also somewhat subjective and typically difficult to do, especially for first time OER writers. Many mid-grade officers, upon writing their first OER on another officer, realize the difference between writing about themselves and writing about their subordinates. Hopefully, this article will assist Supervisors (SUP) and Reporting Officers (RO) navigate between the science of the Officer Evaluation System and the art of human performance reviews. Writing better, more useful OERs will aid the Coast Guard assessment of the Reported-On Officer (ROO) and reflect positively on the rating chain.

## OER Importance

Reiterating past message traffic, road shows, and board feedback, the OER is the most important document in an officer's record. Decisions of promotion boards, assignment and special panels are based on matters of record. In short, if performance (either positive or negative) is not documented in the OER, then the Coast Guard probably doesn't know about it. It is your responsibility as Coast Guard leadership to properly evaluate and document the officers under your charge. Doing so objectively and thoroughly will enable the Coast Guard to properly determine the member's potential, abilities, and career path.

## Involve the Reported-On-Officer

The first step to writing an OER is assembling information from at least two sources: your own notes and the ROO's bullets/supporting documentation. It is absolutely true that having more information, if properly submitted and organized, will allow you to pick and choose the most relevant and important events during an ROO's period of report. Ensure junior ROOs receive basic OER training and understand your expectations on how (and what) to submit their information. This will help you in the writing process; furthermore, it will prevent delays that only make writing the OER more difficult. If the ROO doesn't submit their information on time, you are required to move ahead as best you can. Do not use the OER as the first counseling tool! You should give feedback to the ROO regularly; there shouldn't be any surprises in the OER.

## OER Writing Styles

How you actually write the OER is a matter of personal preference and experience. The PERSMAN sets minimum expectations and requirements, providing a common basis for all OERs. Remember that promotion boards and assignment panels are the main users of the OER, so keep their needs and

expectations in mind when writing. Without reiterating the manual, SUPs and ROs are given a fixed amount of space to evaluate the ROO. Be mindful of the balance between brevity and detail, while always showing impact to the Coast Guard. Use multiple examples of performance (while being brief) that clearly shows how the ROO performed (with some detail), and how that action impacted the Coast Guard is the hallmark of a well-written OER. Writing styles will vary in many ways, but one difference is order: numbers or text first? Both ways work, but ensure what you write and what you mark agree with each other.

Demonstrating impact is a matter of stepping back from the incident/action and taking a broader perspective. As an example, writing that the ROO got an IT system accredited/operational does not show impact. Telling how that system directly improves CG situational awareness, removes stovepipes within the CG, or saves the CG money shows the impact of the ROO's actions. Write to the general officer, not to someone in your own specialty, because the majority of officers reading the OER will not be from your community.

Above all, the OER should tell a story. For many, the story should capture high-sustained performance, professional growth, and positive impact to the Coast Guard. Within each block (Performance of Duties, Communication, etc.), tell the story generally along the order of the performance dimensions (Planning, Using Resources, etc.), but do not feel overly constrained by the order within each block. The best written block will have multiple bullets that address every performance dimension in the block, each followed by clear impact to the Coast Guard. Remember, don't explicitly say the ROO is a great performer; tell a story of great performance that had significant impact.

## OER Writing Tips / Concerns

Remember that OERs are all about performance and what was accomplished during the period of report. Good bullets support multiple performance dimensions; it is expected that significant events in the period will be mentioned in different blocks. Balance this, however, with placing too much emphasis on a few actions. If the OER is all about one event, readers will justifiably ask, "What else did the ROO do during the period?"

Every officer balances their primary duty with their collaterals. The OERs should reflect that balance; so don't let collaterals take up too much space. If a Marine Inspector/Morale Officer's OER talks too much about the holiday party and Coast Guard Day, then the boards and the assignment officer may have pointed questions about the ROO's direction, focus, and task management.

Coast Guard civilian employment cannot be mentioned in the OER, since the impact you have as a civilian is documented in

the civilian system and you were not functioning as a reservist (i.e. wearing the uniform) at the time. While there may be some overlap (ICS training received as GS may count towards your Reserve requirements), always remember that performance and impact should be the watchwords when writing the OER.

Many reservists' civilian jobs mirror Coast Guard responsibilities (e.g. law enforcement). Mentioning civilian employment is not allowed, although the demonstrated impact the ROO has on the Coast Guard, because of the employment, can be mentioned in the OER. One example is a firefighter: saving 10 people from a burning building is an amazing and heroic act, but it can't be in the OER. Using their firefighter connections to obtain resources from local governments to aid a Coast Guard response to a hazardous material spill can and should be included in the OER. The rule of thumb should always be: what was the impact for the Coast Guard?

Many officers ask if there are hidden messages in an OER, and how to ensure the right "signals" are sent to the board. There are no secret phrases; writing a clear story of the member's performance is the only way of conveying your opinion and intent. Don't second guess what a promotion board is focusing on, as it changes from year to year. The best indicator is the Commandant's Guidance to the boards, which is published every year. Remember that sometimes it's what is not said in the OER that matters as much as what is said. The board should have no questions about the following generics: Did the ROO meet your objectives/expectations? Did they make every day count and bring positive impact to the Coast Guard? Are they recommended for promotion?

Another common question revolves around fitting material into the OER; the negative perception of "white space" versus adding fluff. The submission schedule is designed so that officers should have plenty of time to perform enough to earn a well written, complete, and "packed with good bullets" OER. If there is an unusually short reporting period, e.g. a six month and two-week OER for a Reserve lieutenant who didn't do any Active Duty Training (who normally gets a 24-month OER with two ADT periods), the SUP and ROO may have to weigh the temptation of adding fluff versus leaving part of the OER blank. Either choice bodes poorly for the ROO, although you can minimize the impact in the Potential Block. Be candid with the reader; write to the performance of the ROO and give your evaluation as such (you can say it was a very short period of report). Senior CG leadership has written their own share of OERs; they will be able to tell which bullets matter and which do not add impact. If needed, look to extend the period of report in



accordance  
with the  
PERSMAN.

## Block 10: Potential

Most officers will agree the Potential Block, Block 10, is the most important block in the OER. The CG looks to the ROO for guidance and recommendations on the ROO's promotability, assignment recommendations, abilities, and special skills. The expectations and writing style of this block differ from the other sections.

Instead of past tense, write in future and present tenses as appropriate. Be clear about your feelings on promoting this officer.

As a good leader, you should be counseling the ROO on a regular basis and know what path they want their career to take. Whatever you think about the ROO's next tour, be upfront! Make sure the ROO has earned your recommendation for that next assignment. Nothing is worse than recommending an officer for a job when they are not ready and seeing them subsequently fail.

## Conclusion

Writing OERs for your subordinates is part and parcel of good leadership and stewardship. Remember that while the ROO has some accountability in the OER process, you have the ultimate responsibility in submitting a document that the Coast Guard can use for promotions, assignments, and panels. Remember to tell a story the average Coast Guard officer can understand and appreciate. By crafting well-written OERs, you ensure the boards and assignment officers can make personnel management decisions in the best interest of the Coast Guard.

About the Author: *LT Mayer is the Reserve Officer Status Manager for the Reserve Personnel Management Division at Coast Guard Personnel Service Center (PSC-rpm-1). He is responsible for career counseling for Reserve junior officers, handles Command Screening Panels, and assists with captain and commander assignments. As the previous OES Manager, he was responsible for validating all IDPL officer's OERs and training the Rating Chain and Reported-On Officers in accordance with the OES. LT Mayer is a graduate of the Coast Guard Academy and served with reservists at Marine Safety Office Port Arthur, Texas immediately following Sept. 11, 2001. He started serving as a Reserve Program Administrator in 2007.*