

# Guidelines & Best Practices for Student Notes

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The goal of Starfish is to document your interactions with students and share information with other colleagues who are working collaboratively to support student success. An important way to document student interactions in Starfish is through notes, both general notes and appointment notes. These assist you in remembering interactions and allow other authorized colleagues to be aware of interactions.

## Creating Notes in Starfish

When making notes, please keep in mind the following details:

- Shared vs. Private Notes – Every note entered should be considered subject to review because of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which allows students to inspect their educational records upon request. This is true even if you select the Private Notes option. For this reason, all Starfish notes default to a “shared” notes setting and private notes should not be used. A good rule is to avoid writing anything you would not be comfortable with students, their parents, or potentially a third party reviewing.
- Avoid copying and pasting email exchanges inside a note as this creates a long narrative that is difficult to review quickly. If you want to preserve an email exchange, please upload it as a document that attaches to the student’s folder.
  - Remember, these document uploads are subject to student review under FERPA and would be discoverable in litigation, so be clear and factual in the email chain.

## General Guidelines for Notes

- **Observe FERPA guidelines** and remember that all notes or documents in Starfish may be reviewed by the student or discoverable in litigation. Further information on FERPA can be found online at: <https://www.sac.edu/StudentServices/AdmissionsRecords/Pages/FERPA-Policy-.aspx>.
- Be factual and exclude opinions, including subjective judgments about motive or character, etc. Describe your interactions as if you were an observer.
- Don’t evaluate or diagnose a student. You may include quotes of something a student shared with you.
- Record concise, bulleted statements or summaries rather than long narratives.
- Enter notes immediately following a student interaction—letting time pass can mean a loss or inaccuracy in recording important details.
- Consult with supervisors and colleagues verbally when there is a question about what information to include or to request advice on how best to approach documentation.

### Examples of What to EXCLUDE in Your Notes

- Exclude your subjective judgments about the student.  
Don't write: *"Student isn't suited for SAC and would be better off at another community college."*  
**BETTER:** *"Student disclosed difficulty adjusting to campus life and stated it was more challenging than expected."*  
Don't write: *"Student argued with me about missing the posted deadline and stormed out of the office."*  
**BETTER:** *"Student appeared frustrated about missing the posted deadline and left my office before the end of the meeting."*
- Exclude personal concerns of the student.  
Don't write: *"Student said it was difficult to succeed in class because of Professor X's poor English."*  
**BETTER:** *"Student shared difficulty following the lecture in class. Referred student to learning support resources available on campus."*
- Exclude details about identity, disability status, physical or mental health conditions, or negative student comments about a colleague. Reframe from including diagnostic information that you learned from the student. Exclude descriptions or characteristics of a student's struggles that, by their nature, serve as de facto "diagnostic impressions".  
Don't write: *"Student was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder and is also pregnant. She is worried about passing her classes this semester."*  
Don't write: *"Student avoids eye contact, doesn't participate in class activities that require social interaction, and has a hard time switching to new topics."* [This reflects widely-held perceptions of students with autism].  
**BETTER:** *"Student shared personal history that may have future academic implications. Discussed Health and Wellness Center [or DSPS] support options with the student."*

### Examples of What to INCLUDE in Your Notes

- Include comments that help you in future interactions with the student.  
*"Student was well prepared for advising session and had tentative classes mapped out."*  
*"Scheduled bi-weekly meetings to coach student on completing assignments on time."*
- Include notes for how you helped the student.  
*"Reminded student to call the Dean's office to reschedule a missed dean's meeting."*
- Include possible consequences of not following through on recommendations offered.  
*"Reviewed course sequencing for required courses. Student understands ability to enroll in course ABC will not be possible without XYZ prerequisite."*
- Include notes that will help future staff understand the student or the advice that you provided.  
*"Talked about ways to cope during the holiday break and with family situation."*
- Include referrals of a non-sensitive nature.  
*"Encouraged student to make an appointment with a career counselor."*

### A Note on Reporting a Student Conduct/Incident of Concern

- Refer to the **Maxient Form** to report student discipline, concerning or threatening behavior, academic integrity, and Title IX matters. Maxient serves as an integral component to SAC's early alert efforts. Submitted reports should always include the student's name, ID number and as much detail as possible. The report is directed to the appropriate college personal (Campus Safety, Dean of Student Development, Title IX Coordinator) for further support and intervention. Unlike many flags and referrals in Starfish, the student is not aware of the report until an outreach occurs.
- The Maxient Form is accessible on the campus computer desktop or via the Faculty & Staff webpage <https://www.sac.edu/FacultyStaff/Pages/default.aspx>