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Poorly written FITREPs routinely ruin careers. As competition for top jobs grows more intense, a single misstep can place a Sailor in the "dog house" for years, if not permanently. Therefore, let me share with you my perspective on fitness report preparation. Selection boards use FITREPs to decide on promotions and to select senior officers and COs for pay billets. Accordingly, write FITREPs for selection boards, and recognize that only the reviewing board member will actually read the comments. Aim for "talking points" that the briefer can use to sell your Sailor to other board members.

Selection board members notice the following items when evaluating a record. Uncertainty rarely works in one's favor, and records with questionable FITREPs rarely get the benefit of doubt. To avoid inadvertently damaging your people's careers (or to document performance that is not superlative), be aware of the following deadly sins:

Lack of continuity. Records should have day-to-day continuity. If not, it begs the question, "what happened during this hole?" As mentioned previously, uncertainty is bad. Ensure that the FROM date is one day after the last TO date, or help your Sailor retrieve the missing dates with the previous reporting senior.

Non-descriptive block 29 abbreviation. The 14 characters in the block 29 duties box appear in the performance summary record (PSR) briefed at boards. List the most significant duty performed. Common abbreviations are best (e.g., CO, XO, CMC). If a person served only part-time in that job, still list it (and quantify months in block 29 text.) If you're especially clever, recognize that the PSR line breaks after seven characters -- two spaces between ADMIN and OFFICER enhance readability.

The Ten Deadly Sins of FITREPs

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2.0 (or 1.0) in any trait. Technically, only a 1.0 is adverse. In practice, a 2.0 will do the trick. Only use these grades to identify clearly substandard performance of a nature that warrants an entry in a Sailor's permanent record.

4.0 (or 3.0) in leadership. If you can have only one 5.0 trait, you want it to be leadership. An otherwise glowing FITREP without a top grade here may cause concern. Any other trait can be other than 5.0. Use this to flag Sailors who still need improvement in this area.

Missing, reversed, or minimal billet assignment recommendations. The best first entry in block 40 is "FLAG" for O-6s, "CO" for officers, "Command (Master/Senior) Chief " or "Senior Enlisted Advisor" for Chiefs. Additionally, reiterate these recommendations in block 41 comments. Potential negative: senior officers not recommended for command, or receiving inverted recommendations (e.g., "XO/CO"). Be honest, though, and only recommend for command those you consider ready for it. "Assignment in rate" is least complimentary for enlisted. Assignments below paygrade (e.g., "Division Officer" for O-5s) spells trouble.

Weak comments. Civic contributions, routine duties, and adjectives without supporting facts are "fluff." Fluffy FITREPs imply a Sailor did not accomplish anything significant. Many reporting seniors resort to fluff when receiving weak or non-existent inputs. Consider the uses of FITREPs mentioned above. If a sentence will not make a difference, leave it out. If it means the FITREP is uncomfortably brief, so be it. Use initial and midterm counseling sessions to established meaningful goals to avoid end-of-year gaps.

Lack of strong opening and closing line. The first and last comment lines are FITREP "sweet spots." This is where a record reviewer looks first. Use this prime advertising space to sell your

Sailor. "Ranked #1 of 48 commanders of any designator" is a silver bullet. "CDR Smith has continued to perform his outstanding and demanding duties in a superlative manner" is fluff. Same officer, vastly different perception. If possible, leave line 2 and 17 blank so first and last lines stand out even more. Close with future recommendation: "select for command now," "promote now," etc. These become your talking points for the board.

Accomplishments in AT FITREP only. AT FITREPs are highly overrated, and are not required for duty at one's supported command. Many board members barely glance at them while reading IDT FITREPs judiciously. If a Sailor makes significant achievements on AT, reflect that in the regular report as well.

EP left on the table. Any 1-of-1 FITREP that is not "EP" is damaging, regardless of the comments. There is no penalty to the grader for using the "EP," thus boards consider a 1-of-1 "MP" to be a negative signal. A 1-of-1 "P" can be devastating. Use this only when telling a board that this individual is not up to par.

Failure to manage reporting senior average. FITREPs require summary group average in block 45. However, Sailors (and COs) may not know the reporting senior's cumulative average at FITREP time. A 4.00 in a summary group averaging 3.70 is great, but if the cumulative average is 4.50, this is substandard. For new COs, remember that the first FITREP you write is your cumulative average; start low and work your way up so that you don't run out of maneuvering room later in your career. Boards also consider how many FITREPs reporting seniors have written. It won't matter if the first FITREP you sign is 3.5 or 5.0; the narrative will make or break your case. If you think you have been guilty of these sins, review BUPERSINST 1610.10b, take these lessons to heart, and go forth and sin no more.