



Organizing and prioritizing information

Introductory notes for instructors

Legal life skills outcomes

Knowledge:

- places to ask for help

Skills:

- prioritizing information
- notetaking
- numeracy
- literacy

Personal capabilities and circumstances:

- asking questions effectively
- prioritizing information when under stress



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Organizing and prioritizing information

In another lesson [See **Keeping documents and records**], we learned about the importance of keeping documents and records and keeping them organized. In this lesson, we will learn about how to make sure important information doesn't go missing when you try to talk about your problem to a hotline worker or legal helper.

What does prioritizing information mean?

To "prioritize" something means to treat it as more important than other things. For example, you can "prioritize" things you need to get done at work or home by making a list and putting the more important or urgent tasks at the top.

So, "prioritizing information" means to look at a bunch of information and decide which information is most important.

You can also prioritize tasks or things that you need to get done. This is sometimes called "making a to-do list". This can help keep you organized both at work and in life.

Why is prioritizing information important?

Prioritizing information is important when you are trying to get help with a legal problem because:

- If you are looking for help from a community agency or a community legal clinic, or a lawyer, the workers there might not have a lot of time to spend with you
- If you have to pay for advice from a lawyer, time is money – the more time you spend talking to them, the more you have to pay
- When a legal problem stresses you out or is confusing, it can be hard to remember the things you need to tell your helper
- Prioritizing information can also help you make sure you tell your helper everything that's important about your situation so that you get the right advice

Have you ever...?

Doctors are another example of people who have limited time to spend with you. For that reason, they can sometimes rush you. (Have you ever left the doctor's office and then thought, "Oh, darn – I asked them about symptoms number 1 and 2, but forgot to ask about symptom 3?"). Making a list in advance of what you want to say really helps with both doctors and lawyers.

Small group activity: prioritizing information – a skill for everyday life

Now that you have read some information about prioritizing information, please discuss these questions within your small group. You can look back at the information if you need to. Pick one member of your group to write down the answers for the whole group.

1. In what other ways do you think that prioritizing information could help you?
2. Have you had to prioritize information in the past? If so, how did you approach this? What did you do?
3. Does anyone have an example of a time when something might have gone more smoothly in work or in life if you been able to prioritize information?
[Example: maybe you didn't get homework done in time because something else came up and you weren't able to get to the homework. But perhaps there was something else you did that could have waited until after finishing the homework: for example, cleaning your place]

Tracy's story

A. Some background about the story

The story you are about to read is about someone who is trying to deal with a problem at work. The story talks about things in a different order to which the events happened.

When you are reading the story, start to think about which pieces of the story are more important for Tracy to tell the legal worker. Also, think about the time sequence in which things happened to Tracy. You will be asked to organize points about her story in chronological order (the order in which things happened to Tracy) after you read the story.

B. Read the story

Tracy was upset when she got home from her job at Widgets Inc., a big manufacturer in Etobicoke. Was it really possible that next Friday would be her last day of work? Her employer had told her that she was being laid off because there were fewer work orders than before. She was confused because just two weeks ago at the staff meeting, he had talked about hiring more staff because some new work orders were coming in. He had even asked her after the staff meeting whether she could recommend anyone! It didn't make sense.

Tracy couldn't prove it, but she suspected that she was laid off because she had told her employer that she was pregnant last week. Her wife, Spiroula, had suggested waiting until she was showing to tell her employer, but Tracy decided it was right to tell him, thinking it would give him lots of time to find someone to replace her. She had been at Widgets Inc. for almost 10 years, and people there felt more like a big community of friends than co-workers. She had never dreamed that something like this would happen.

Tracy and Spiroula discussed Tracy's lay-off over dinner that night. Spiroula felt that Tracy should get some legal help. She encouraged Tracy to sit down right away and document anything and everything that had happened at work that might relate to her situation.

Tracy pulled out the folder she used to keep track of her hours and keep all her pay stubs together. She took a fresh piece of paper and wrote down as much as she could remember about the conversation she'd had with her employer earlier that day when he told her she was being laid off. She added the date and time of the conversation.

She checked her calendar and wrote the date she had told her boss she was pregnant. Then she remembered that one of her co-workers, Josephine, had walked by when she was

telling her boss about her pregnancy, so she made a note to call Josephine and see if she had overheard the conversation. She wasn't sure if that would help, but she wrote it down anyway.

For as long as she had been with the company, she couldn't remember a work shortage ever being mentioned. She made note of that too and decided to ask some coworkers about it.

A few days later, Tracy bumped into another co-worker in the cafeteria, Ali. He told her that he was really sorry to hear that she was going to lose her job. He also said that the employer had just advertised her position. When Tracy heard that, she knew that she had to get some legal help. She organized her papers and called the Workers' Action Centre at (416) 531-0778 to see if they could help her or refer her to someone who could.

C. Activity: Comprehension – chronological order

Put the following events from the story in chronological order. Number the sentences from 1 to 10. This activity will help you organize the story so that it makes more sense to a legal worker who would be talking to Tracy about it.

- _____ a. Tracy spoke to her wife and told her that she'd been laid off.
- _____ b. Ali spoke to Tracy in the cafeteria.
- _____ c. Tracy's employer told her she had been laid off.
- _____ d. The employer posted a job ad for Tracy's position.
- _____ e. Tracy called the Workers' Action Centre.
- _____ f. Tracy made notes about her conversation with the employer.
- _____ g. Tracy decided to tell her employer that she was pregnant.
- _____ h. Tracy's wife told her to document everything.
- _____ i. Tracy's employer told staff about plans to hire new staff.
- _____ j. Tracy told her employer that she was pregnant.

D. Activity: Notetaking

Notetaking is an important skill that you can use not just to deal with a legal problem if you have one, but in other areas of your life.

In point form, write the notes that Tracy made to document her situation, using the timeline you created in Section C as a reference. You can make up details such as names and dates, and the nature of Tracy's job.

E. Activity: Making a to-do list

Another form of prioritizing that can help you get organized in your life is making a to-do list. When you make a to-do list, you can rank things that you have to get done in order of what is most urgent and what can wait.

In the space below, make a to-do list using these common activities. Add three other activities that you regularly have to do to the list, then organize them in the order that you want to get them done. Some examples to include are:

- doing laundry
- going to the grocery store
- doing homework for my class
- searching for jobs
- paying bills
- [your activity here]
- [your activity here]
- [your activity here]

F. Large group activity: What have we learned today?

Now that you have done some exercises about prioritizing information, let's talk about what we learned in today's class. You can make point-form notes in the space below.

Teaching notes and answer keys

Answers

Small group activity: prioritizing information – a skill for everyday life

1. In which other contexts do you think that prioritizing information could help you?

Possible answers: in the workplace, dealing with a landlord, calling a government agency, going to court for a speeding ticket...

2. Have you had to prioritize information in the past? If so, how did you approach this? What did you do?

3. Does anyone have an example of a time when something might have gone more smoothly in work or in life if you been able to prioritize information?

[Example: maybe you didn't get homework done in time because something else came up and you weren't able to get to the homework. But perhaps there was something else you did that could have waited until after finishing the homework: for example, cleaning your place]

4. Does anyone have an example to talk about whether something might have gone more smoothly in work or in life if you had taken time to prioritize information?

Tracy's story

This story reinforces the importance of keeping records and documents and of making notes about incidents that could be relevant in the case of an unfair dismissal. The activities that follow provide an opportunity to practice prioritizing skills, with an emphasis on notetaking skills.

C. Activity: Comprehension

Put the following events from the story in chronological order. Number the sentences from 1 to 10. This activity will challenge your knowledge of the simple past and past perfect, as your instructor has discussed with you.

- 5 a. Tracy spoke to her wife and told her that she'd been laid off.
- 9 b. Ali spoke to Tracy in the cafeteria.
- 4 c. Tracy's employer told her she had been laid off.
- 8 d. The employer posted a job ad for Tracy's position.
- 10 e. Tracy called the Workers' Action Centre.
- 7 f. Tracy made notes about her conversation with the employer.
- 2 g. Tracy decided to tell her employer that she was pregnant.
- 6 h. Tracy's wife told her to document everything.
- 1 i. Tracy's employer told staff about plans to hire new staff.
- 3 j. Tracy told her employer that she was pregnant.

D. Activity: Notetaking

Notetaking is an important skill that you can use not just to deal with a legal problem if you have one, but in other areas of your life.

In point form, write the notes that Tracy made to document her situation, using the timeline you created in Section C as a reference. You can add details such as names and dates, and the nature of Tracy's job.

Sample answer:

September 8, 2017

- At 4:30 pm, Bob gave me notice that I'm laid off – told me it was because of work shortage – said he was sorry to lose me, my work has been good – I was in shock, didn't ask questions – I think it's because I told him I was pregnant
- Told Milton I'm pregnant September 2, 2017 at about 10 am – must call Josephine – I think she overheard me telling Bob about pregnancy
- At staff meeting August 11, 2017, no mention of work shortage – in fact, Bob talked about things getting busier, new work orders, hiring new staff to meet demands
- Ran into Ali in the cafeteria around noon – he told me that Bob had posted my position!
- Found phone number of Workers' Action Centre – 416.531.0778

E. Activity: Making a to-do list

Open a discussion with the group, asking if they faced any challenges in prioritizing their tasks and coming up with their to-do lists.

F. Large group activity: What have we learned today?

Open a discussion with the group, asking what they have learned from today's lesson that they can use in their daily lives.

Legal information for learners:

CLEO "Your Rights at Work" — <http://www.cleo.on.ca/en/publications/rightswrk>
To order free copies of "Your rights at work" for your class, you can use the online order form at <http://cleo.on.ca> or call 416-408-4420.

CLEO Steps to Justice website:
<http://stepstojustice.ca/category/legal-topic/employment-and-work>