

Script for Captivate Tutorial “Reporting Results AmeriCorps VISTA”

Slide 1: Introduction

Welcome to “Reporting Results AmeriCorps VISTA”. This tutorial will help you write informative and well-organized progress reports for your VISTA project.

This tutorial was developed by Project STAR in cooperation with the Corporation for National and Community Service. If you have questions, please contact Project STAR by emailing us at star@jbsinternational.com or by calling us at 1-800-548-3656.

This tutorial moves at a pace set by you. To advance to the next slide, simply click the forward arrow in the control panel at the bottom of the slide. Click the forward arrow now to continue.

Slide 2: Tutorial Agenda

This tutorial covers:

- The value of project progress reports
- Reporting best practices, including general tips, and advice on reporting about the project plan, and on completing the narratives.
- Using a template to organize reporting information for the project plan, along with a detailed reporting example
- And, a list of additional resources to help you report results.

A short, optional quiz is also available at the end of this tutorial to enhance your learning experience.

Slide 3: Getting Help With eGrants

Please note that this tutorial does not discuss how to use the eGrants system. For help with eGrants, you can contact the eGrants Help Desk by email or by dialing 888-677-7849. If you are interested in learning about eGrants training sessions, you can contact the eGrants Coaching Unit by email. You can also visit their home page at the National Service Resource Center to access eGrants-related resources.

Slide 4: The Value of Progress Reports

Let's take a moment to remind ourselves why progress reports are worth doing.

For starters, progress reports are an important means of ensuring accountability to funders and other stakeholders.

Progress reports help to identify and address VISTA projects' technical assistance needs. This can happen either when the project explicitly identifies TA needs in the progress report, or when the CNCS program specialist independently determines that TA needs exist based on what's in the progress report.

Writing the progress report provides an opportunity to take a step back from the day-to-day management of the VISTA to look at the big picture, re-assess your progress and make adjustments to your project. Of course, adjustments should be made in consultation with the program specialist.

Each time you write a progress report, you write another chapter in the history of your VISTA project. To the extent these reports include relevant information in sufficient detail, these progress reports can serve as a useful record for the project manager to look back at to see where the project has been and where it is going.

Finally, each time you submit a progress report to the Corporation, you are adding your project's achievements to those of every other project in the country. In this way, you are helping to build and maintain support for VISTA as a National Service program.

Slide 5: Best Practices—General Tips

Now let's consider some general tips to aid in completing and submitting high-quality progress reports in a timely manner.

First of all, make sure you know when your progress reports are due. Check in eGrants or contact your state office if you are not sure when to report.

While most VISTA projects report twice per year, be aware that if you are a first-year project you may be required to report on a quarterly basis.

Report due dates usually fall on the last day of January, April, July, and October.

Slide 6: General Tips (continued)

It is very important to keep good records throughout the year. Minimally, this means collecting data on a regular basis. Also, keeping a weekly journal of activities and accomplishments can be very helpful to jog your memory when it's time to write a report.

Schedule plenty of time to write the report. Starting one month before the report is due is not too early. Give yourself enough time to write a first draft, get feedback from a trusted reviewer, and revise the report before submitting it to the state office.

Organize all the documents you need for the report in one place. Whether this means paper or electronic files, this information should be at your fingertips when it's time to write a report.

When writing the report, avoid the temptation to bury the reader in detail. This makes more work for both the reader and the writer. Instead, start by developing an outline of the most important accomplishments you want to discuss and build your report around these accomplishments.

Slide 7: General Tips (continued)

You are advised not to leave anything blank in your progress report. Doing so may lead the reader as to wonder if you left the space blank intentionally or simply forgot to fill it out.

Similarly, you are advised against writing "not applicable" or "NA" in the progress report. If you believe that something is really not applicable, then briefly explain why.

It is always a good idea to spell-check your document. You don't want it to look like something your dog wrote.

And, since you cannot check spelling in eGrants, you are advised not to compose the report in eGrants. Instead, compose text in a word processor before cutting-and-pasting into eGrants. Composing in a word processor also gives you a larger workspace than the eGrants textboxes and allows you to save your text to the computer.

Finally, if you are a new VISTA project that is currently bringing VISTA members on board, you may not have much to say about the project's achievements. In that case, put more time and effort into describing program startup efforts, including recruiting, training and placing VISTAs.

Slide 8: Best Practices—Project Plan Reporting

Now let's consider some best practices specifically related to reporting on your VISTA project plan.

The first point to consider is that a clear, concise project plan is the key to good, simple reporting. Take a look at your project plan to make sure it is clear, particularly regarding your performance milestones and how you intend to measure them. If they are not clear then you may have difficulty reporting on them. Check out the resources listed at the end of this tutorial to get help with clarifying your project plan.

Keep your reporting aligned with the original project plan. You don't want to get into a situation of comparing apples and oranges. Pay particular attention to the targets listed in your performance milestones. If the original target is a number, then report a number. If it is a percent, then report a percentage.

When reporting on milestones during the year, you may not be sure what to say if all results are not in yet. In this case, be sure to report your progress and any data you have. In addition, give the reader an idea of when you expect to have data to report.

Slide 9: Project Plan Reporting (continued)

When reporting on the project plan, include numerical information whenever possible. Do not rely on vague or "fluffy" descriptions.

When reporting on a target that is a percentage, do not just report the percentage, but also include the numbers that you used to calculate the percentage. This gives the reader an idea about the *quantity* of data you collected.

Also, report the number of data collection instruments that were completed. This is especially important whenever you report on surveys or other instruments that may have been completed by someone other than VISTAs or project staff.

Slide 10: Project Plan Reporting Template

Now let's take a look at an optional template to help you report on the performance milestones in your VISTA project plan. We will also illustrate how to use this template via an example.

Slide 11: Project Plan Reporting Template

You are looking at a template developed by Project STAR to help you complete the project plan section of the progress report. You are not required to use this template, but it can help you organize reporting information. The template questions are helpful in guiding both reader and writer through the report.

Question 1 asks if we have collected data to measure the performance milestone. This is a simple yes-or-no question.

Answer question 1.a. if you have not started to collect data for this performance milestone. Briefly describe how you are preparing to collect data and when you expect to begin collecting data for this milestone.

Answer question 1.b if you have started collecting data. Describe your results and compare them to the anticipated results. Be sure to compare the actual results to the original performance milestone. If you've fallen short of the target, explain this as best you can and say what you plan to do to address this going forward.

Question 2 asks us to describe how data were collected, who collected the data, what tools were used, and when data were collected. Provide enough information here so the reader can understand how the milestone was tracked or measured. This is also a good place to note challenges encountered in collecting data.

Slide 12: Project Plan Reporting Template (continued)

Here is a screenshot of the VISTA progress report in eGrants. In this view, you can see that the VISTA supervisor has pasted the template into the textbox for reporting on a performance milestone, labeled "progress this reporting period." Note that you should fill out the template in your word processor, and then copy-and-paste the whole thing into the eGrants textbox.

Slide 13: Project Plan Reporting Example, Milestone #1

Now, here is a screenshot of a reporting example. In this example, the VISTA project is building a volunteer recruitment system to secure a steady supply of mentors for children of incarcerated parents. They have developed three performance milestones to track for the first year. This is a mid-year report.

Move your mouse over the highlighted areas to get a better look at the reporting details for this milestone.

We have highlighted information to help you see what the VISTA supervisor has added to the template. The non-highlighted information is the original template text, while the highlighted information is text the VISTA supervisor has entered into the template to address the questions.

The first performance milestone states that 3 components of the volunteer recruitment and management system will be created and/or revised. Notice how the reporting under 1.B. is neatly organized and to-the-point. The text does not wander from the original project plan. Instead, it addresses the same milestone identified in the original project plan. Notice that the VISTA supervisor explicitly states that the target was met. You should always state explicitly whether or not the target was met.

Slide 14: Project Plan Reporting Example, Milestone #2

The second performance milestone states that new and revised volunteer recruitment systems will become operational, as evidenced by volunteers being recruited using the new systems. The target is to recruit 40 new volunteers using the new systems.

Once again, move your mouse over the highlighted areas to get a better look at the reporting details for this milestone.

The report notes that 5 volunteers had been recruited as of March 31st. Note that the VISTA supervisor is eager to mention that 10 additional volunteers have been recruited since March 31st, but we don't capture these 10 additional volunteers in the target box, since, technically, only 5 volunteers were recruited as of March 31st. Instead, we mention them in the narrative box. We can capture these additional volunteers in the target box when we do the next progress report.

Since the VISTA members have not been completing the Volunteer Recruitment Log weekly, as stated in the original project plan, the VISTA supervisor describes how often they are being completed and why a different schedule is being followed.

Slide 15: Project Plan Reporting Example, Milestone #3

The third performance milestone states that volunteers recruited with the new systems will serve for at least 3 months. The target is 75 percent.

Once again, move your mouse over the highlighted areas to get a better look at the reporting details for this milestone.

Results are not available yet because not enough time has passed to determine how many volunteers will stay on board for at least 3 months.

Note that we've reported to the fullest possible extent for this mid-year report. We try to avoid leaving any blanks. Since we expect to have data for this milestone for the year-end report, we mention this in the text box.

Slide 16: Best Practices—Narratives

Now, let's consider some best practices for completing the progress report narratives.

Always be sure to report your challenges. When doing so, describe not only the challenge but also what you are doing to overcome it.

When discussing recruitment of VISTA members, keep in mind that tasks started by one VISTA may need to be completed by his or her replacement. It's a good idea to talk about the steps you're taking to ensure a smooth transition between VISTAs who are leaving the project and new VISTAs who are coming in.

When discussing training and technical assistance needs, be sure to describe the needs of your project. There's no need to describe training or technical assistance you have received from the Corporation state office.

Slide 17: Best Practices—Narratives (continued)

Developing partnerships and fostering collaborations is very important work. When describing these efforts, it is recommended that you not only describe the efforts themselves, but also remind the reader why you are undertaking these efforts. In other words, tell the reader how activities with partners relate to achieving important project goals.

When discussing resource development, always remember to indicate who gave you the resources, what the resources are, and how you will use them.

Sustainability is the true mark of long-term project success. When describing sustainability efforts let the reader know how these efforts will ensure that VISTA project accomplishments will endure beyond the life of the VISTA project.

Slide 18: Best Practices—Narratives (continued)

The other accomplishments narrative is something of a catchall. You can use it to communicate important information about your VISTA project that you were not able to find a place for elsewhere in the progress report. Always be sure to provide specific, concrete information.

For example, when describing grants, hit on key points like how VISTAs were involved in the grant request, how much money was awarded, who the funder is, and how the dollars will be used.

Similarly, in the case of training events, tell the reader how many participants were trained, what the training covered, and who conducted the training.

Finally, if you achieve something noteworthy during the year, don't feel that you have to wait until the next progress report to let your state office know. You can notify them of the good news right away with an email or phone call.

Slide 19-24: Test Your Knowledge

We are nearly at the end of this tutorial. You are invited to take a few minutes to enhance your learning experience with a short quiz. Please click "Take Quiz" to test your knowledge, or click "Skip Quiz" to go to the end.

Slide 25: Wrap-up

This concludes "Reporting Results for AmeriCorps VISTA".

For more information, please contact your Corporation State Office.

You can access Project STAR resources online at the National Service Resource Center.

You can also reach Project STAR by telephone at 1-800-548-3656, and by email at star@jbsinternational.com.