

# THE CLASSIFIER'S HANDBOOK

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(Also See [The Introduction to the Position Classification Standards.](#))

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## PREFACE

This material is provided to give background information, general concepts, and technical guidance that will aid those who classify positions in selecting, interpreting, and applying Office of Personnel Management (OPM) classification standards. This is a guide to good judgment, not a substitute for it. The guidance contained here is official guidance and may be cited as a reference when evaluating positions covered by the General Schedule.

This guidance supersedes and replaces *Classification Principles and Policies* dated 1963 and August 1976. It incorporates material from the OPM pamphlet *How to Write Position Descriptions Under the Factor Evaluation System*, dated September 1979, and *Instructions for the Factor Evaluation System*, dated May 1977. The Factor Evaluation System (FES) Primary Standard is found in the [Introduction to the Position Classification Standards, Appendix 3](#).

## CHAPTER 1, POSITION CLASSIFICATION STANDARDS

Title 5, United States Code, governs the classification of positions in the Federal service. This law states that positions shall be classified based on the duties and responsibilities assigned and the qualifications required to do the work. Section 5104 of title 5 provides definitions for the grade levels of the General Schedule. These grade level definitions are the foundation upon which the position classification standards are built.

The classification of positions recognizes levels of difficulty and responsibility in terms of the grade levels established in law. Although the Federal classification system is not a pay plan, it is vital to the structure and administration of employee compensation. The pay system is influenced not only by the grade level of positions but also by other factors, such as quality of performance, length of service, and recruitment and retention considerations. The pay system can be changed independently of the classification system as shown by the enactment of the Federal Employees' Pay Comparability Act of 1990.

The law requires the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to define Federal occupations, establish official position titles, and describe the grades of various levels of work. To fulfill this responsibility, OPM approves and issues position classification standards that must be used by agencies to determine the title, series, and grade of positions covered by title 5.

Classification standards play an important role in assuring a sound Federal personnel management program. This role becomes increasingly significant as agencies decentralize more and more personnel authorities, including the authority to classify positions. With this greater delegation of authority, both personnel and operating officials at many organizational levels of agencies are classifying positions. It is vital, therefore, that the underlying principles and policies of classification, as well as the standards themselves, be applied with a full understanding of their purpose and intent, and with an acceptance of the responsibility that goes with their use.

Agencies are required to classify positions consistent with the criteria and guidance issued by OPM. Official titles published in classification standards must be used for personnel, budget, and fiscal purposes. Organizational or other titles may be constructed and used for internal administration, public convenience, law enforcement, or similar purposes.

Most occupations change over time, but the fundamental duties, responsibilities, and qualifications required generally remain the same. Thus, careful application of appropriate, established classification standards and guidance should result in correct classification decisions. Any duties or responsibilities not specifically covered in a standard can still be evaluated by comparison with classification criteria for similar or related kinds of work.

Classification standards are public documents and should be available for review by anyone interested in their content. Copies of current standards must be maintained for use by those with responsibility for classifying positions.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF STANDARDS**

In carrying out its responsibility under law for developing and issuing classification standards, OPM is involved constantly in conducting occupational studies and writing new standards. This effort responds to needs and priorities determined by reports from agencies, identification of new occupations, and analysis of problems and trends in many areas of personnel management.

Most classification standards are developed by OPM. An individual agency, under OPM guidance and oversight, may develop a standard for an occupation that exists only or primarily in that agency. In either case, OPM approves and issues the standards. These standards are recognized as the official documents used for classifying positions.

The development of classification standards is an extensive and complex activity. The process begins with the identification of an occupational area for study and a request to agencies for background information regarding the occupation. After carefully reviewing this material, a standards writer visits many different locations recommended by agencies to gather information about the work. During the course of the study, many people who know about the occupation provide valuable input. Employees performing the work and their supervisors provide information on how the work is organized and performed. Managers and personnel specialists identify problems and issues concerning the occupation. Representatives of unions and professional groups provide information on their special points of view.

After a comprehensive analysis of all the material collected during the factfinding stage, a draft standard is developed and distributed to agencies and others for review, test application, and comment. Data received from the test application, together with these comments, are vital to the standards development process and form the basis for revisions to the draft. When the new standard is issued it supersedes previous material about the occupation and is distributed to all Federal agencies for application. Classification standards remain in effect until OPM abolishes or replaces them.

## **FORMAT OF STANDARDS**

Occupational studies are aimed at developing the most suitable set of classification criteria for each occupation. These criteria clearly describe the occupation and depict the various levels of difficulty and responsibility so they can be understood and consistently applied. They contain enough background information to ensure that positions are classified to the correct series and grade levels.

Some standards are written to cover individual occupations or series, e.g., the standard for the Community Planning Series, GS-0020, and the standard for the Secretary Series, GS-0318. Others standards cover a group of related occupations or series. The Job Family Standard for Professional and Administrative Work in the Accounting and Budget Group, for example, covers several series in the GS-0500 group. Still others are broad guides that cover work with

similar characteristics and functions assigned to positions in many different occupational series. The Office Automation Grade Evaluation Guide and the Grade Level Guide for Instructional Work are examples of standards used to evaluate positions across occupational lines.

The format of standards is designed to provide the best criteria for analyzing and classifying the essential characteristics of a position. Standards issued prior to 1977 are typically in a narrative format, as are a few standards issued since. The Factor Evaluation System (FES) format is most often used for standards written now. This format is appropriate for the classification of most General Schedule work.

## **CHAPTER 2, THE FACTOR EVALUATION SYSTEM**

### **THE STRUCTURE OF FES**

The method for determining an occupational series is the same for all positions, but the methods for determining grades differ according to the basic job evaluation approach used. The Factor Evaluation System (FES) is the method most often used to assign grades to nonsupervisory positions under the General Schedule. FES includes nine factors common to most nonsupervisory positions in General Schedule occupations. Several of these factors have two or more subfactors or concepts that together represent the intent of the whole factor. The FES factors and their subfactors follow.

### **FES FACTORS**

#### **Factor 1 - Knowledge Required by the Position**

- Kind or nature of knowledge and skills needed.
- How the knowledge and skills are used in doing the work.

#### **Factor 2 - Supervisory Controls**

- How the work is assigned.
- Employee's responsibility for carrying out the work.
- How the work is reviewed.

#### **Factor 3 - Guidelines**

- Nature of guidelines for performing the work.
- Judgment needed to apply the guidelines or develop new guides.

#### **Factor 4 - Complexity**

- Nature of the assignment.
- Difficulty in identifying what needs to be done.
- Difficulty and originality involved in performing the work.

**Factor 5 - Scope and Effect**

- Purpose of the work.
- Impact of the work product or service.

**Factor 6 - Personal Contacts**

- People and conditions/setting under which contacts are made.

**Factor 7 - Purpose of Contacts**

- Reasons for contacts in Factor 6.

**Note:** In some FES standards the point values for factors 6 and 7 are combined into a matrix chart. The levels of each factor are described separately.

**Factor 8 - Physical Demands**

- Nature, frequency, and intensity of physical activity.

**Factor 9 - Work Environment**

- Risks and discomforts caused by physical surroundings and the safety precautions necessary to avoid accidents or discomfort.

*The Primary Standard*

The [Primary Standard](#) serves as the framework for FES and for classification standards and guides written in FES format. The Primary Standard describes the basic levels of the nine factors and establishes the point values for each. A conversion table shows the range of total point values for each grade from GS-01 through GS-15. The factor levels in FES classification standards relate to the same factor level concepts of the Primary Standard. Therefore, the Primary Standard, the "standard-for-standards," assures grade alignment among occupations and across organizational lines.

*Factor Level Descriptions*

The factor level descriptions in individual standards and guides show, in essence, the application of the Primary Standard to a specific occupation or group of related occupations. Without deviating from the basic concepts of the Primary Standard, they describe the characteristic levels of each factor in terms of that occupation.

Occupational standards describe only the factor levels applicable in that type of work. For example, the lower levels of "Knowledge Required" would not exist in most professional



positions and would not be described in the factor levels for those occupations. Similarly, the higher levels of "Knowledge Required" would not be described for clerical occupations.

Classification standards and guides will exist in both narrative and FES formats until non-FES standards are revised or superseded. FES standards, except the Primary Standard, may be used with narrative standards for cross series comparison, where appropriate, to classify positions. When FES standards are used in this way, a position description written in FES format provides a clear link to the evaluation criteria used to classify the job.

### *Benchmarks*

Some FES occupational standards and guides include benchmark job descriptions. Benchmarks describe work situations that represent significant numbers of positions in the particular occupation. They state the duties performed and reflect each of the nine factors as they relate to those duties. These benchmarks have been point rated using the factor level descriptions in the standard.

A benchmark may be used as the basic content of an official position description if it completely and accurately describes the position. Organizational locations may be changed as appropriate.

## **EVALUATING A POSITION USING FES**

The basic steps to follow when evaluating a position under FES are:

- prepare a position description in FES format;
- select the appropriate FES standard and grade level criteria; [For guidance on selecting the appropriate standard, see the [Introduction to the Position Classification Standards](#) and [Chapter 5, "Determining the Grade"](#) in this handbook.]
- determine the grade level by assigning a factor level and the corresponding number of points to each of the nine factors in the position description;
- convert the total point value of all the factors to a grade using the established FES point conversion chart; and
- record the results of the evaluation.

The following guidelines should help to simplify this process.

### *The Point Rating Process*

After selecting the appropriate FES standard(s), evaluate each factor in the position description using any of the appropriate factors in the factor level descriptions and/or benchmarks in the standard(s) being used. Then assign corresponding point values for the selected factor levels in the standard. When assigning points, observe the following:

- Use only the specific point values indicated in FES standards. Do not use intermediate point values. Do not extrapolate or interpolate.
- A position factor must fully meet the overall intent of the selected factor level description to warrant a given point value.
- Point values assigned to factors in a position description must relate to only one set of duties and responsibilities. Usually these duties take a majority of the employee's time and have obvious weight and influence for point rating purposes.
- Because of the direct relationship between the position factors and the duties being evaluated, all factors are assigned points based on the same set of duties and responsibilities.

### *Using Factor Level Descriptions*

One level of a factor level description can be compared with lower and higher levels to determine differences in terms of the overall occupation. Each factor level description represents the minimum or "threshold" for that factor. If the position factor exceeds one factor level but fails to meet fully the intent of the next higher factor level, then the lower point value must be credited. A position factor must meet the full intent of a factor level to be credited with that level.

**Note:** Benchmark factor levels and illustrations used in factor level descriptions may not always represent the threshold creditable for that factor. They may reflect conditions that fall anywhere in the range for that factor level. If a position factor appears to fall short of the benchmark factor level or illustration being used for evaluation, then the basic factor level description should be referenced to be sure that the correct point value is credited.

### *Using Benchmarks*

Benchmarks illustrate typical positions at typical grade levels and can often be associated with the position to be classified. In some cases it may be preferable to use the benchmarks to classify positions. In other situations it may be more appropriate to use the factor level descriptions. The same grade should result from using benchmarks or factor level descriptions, alone or in any combination.

Be careful to select a benchmark only if it is very similar to the kind and level of the duties assigned to the position. These duties do not have to be exactly the same as the benchmark because positions will vary somewhat with the mission of the organization. On the other hand, the selection should not be forced. Compare the position factor with the factor level descriptions to confirm the appropriateness of the benchmark.

### *Using the Primary Standard*

The Primary Standard establishes factor levels in broad conceptual terms. As a result, the Primary Standard may not be used alone to classify a position except to point rate an individual position factor when that factor fails to meet the lowest, or exceeds the highest, factor level in the applicable FES standard. In this case the Primary Standard is used as follows:

- compare the position factor to the appropriate range of factor levels in the Primary Standard and select the highest level to which the position factor appears to be fully equivalent;
- compare the same level of a related FES standard (if available) to the position factor being evaluated to ensure that they are equivalent in terms of overall intent; and
- document the decision.

Note that a factor level is described in a standard only when that level represents a significant sample of real nonsupervisory jobs found during an occupational study, and when the jobs are similar enough to form the basis for a genuine factor level description. For other than trainee positions, you should be particularly cautious when deciding to credit a factor level not described in the standard. (Factor levels for trainee or developmental positions in two grade interval occupations are omitted deliberately from most standards and guides.)

The Primary Standard may be used for supplemental guidance but only in conjunction with other FES standards. The Primary Standard is also used to review draft FES standards to ensure that factor level concepts for the specific occupation are consistent with basic FES factor levels.

### *Conversion to GS Grades*

After completing the point rating process, determine the grade level by comparing the point total for all of the factor levels with the grade conversion chart in the standard.

### *Borderline Total Points*

If the total point value for the position is just below or above the cutoff point between two GS grades, then--

- determine if there are significant deviations in the patterns of factor level matches for the position being classified when compared with those found in OPM benchmarks and illustrations or in similar agency positions in that occupation; and

- carefully review the evaluation of each factor level to be sure the interpretation is correct.

After completing these steps, classify the position at the grade indicated by the total points.

### *Even Grade Positions in Two Grade Interval Series*

It is conceivable that FES may produce a few more positions than previously existed in the even number grades for two grade interval occupations. Although very unusual, this may happen because FES uses one set of factor values for all occupations. If, after checking the evaluation carefully, the position factors convert to an even grade, then it is the correct grade for the position.

### *Trainee and Developmental Positions*

Many FES standards do not include factor level descriptions for trainee and developmental positions. To classify these positions, the Primary Standard or other related FES standards, or both, may be used to apply factor levels lower than those reflected in the occupational standard.

### *Recording the Results*

Each position classified by an FES standard must have a record of the classification judgments made. (A sample position evaluation statement follows.) At a minimum, the point values for each factor, the total point values, and the General Schedule grade must be shown on, or attached to, all copies of the position description. In addition, the benchmark(s) or factor level description(s) used in point rating must be shown either on the position description or on the evaluation form. Narrative evaluation reports need only be used for FES evaluations when there could be a question regarding the judgments made. Comprehensive evaluation reports generally are required when the classification of the position has been appealed.

## POSITION CLASSIFICATION STANDARDS FES EVALUATION STATEMENT

Title, Series, and  
Grade

Organization

Position #

<b>Evaluation Factors</b>	<b>Points Assigned</b>	<b>Standards Used (Bmk #, FL#, etc)</b>	<b>Comments</b>
1. Knowledge Required by the Position			
2. Supervisory Controls			
3. Guidelines			
4. Complexity			
5. Scope and Effect			
6. Personal Contacts			
7. Purpose of Contacts			
8. Physical Demands			
9. Work Environment			
<b>S U M M A R Y</b>	<b>Total Points</b>		
	<b>Grade Conversion</b>		

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## FACTOR LEVEL RELATIONSHIPS

The following tables illustrate how FES factors are often used in typical positions classified in series involving professional, administrative, technical, and clerical and assistance work. These tables will help to understand how the most common factor levels are used at various grades for different kinds of work. They show examples only. They do not preclude the use of other factor levels that may be appropriate depending on the assignment of duties and responsibilities to a particular position.

**Table 1** **PROFESSIONAL WORK**

FACTOR LEVELS	GS-05	GS-07	GS-09	GS-11	GS-12	GS-13	GS-14	GS-15
1. Knowledge Required by the Position	1-5	1-6	1-6	1-7	1-7	1-8	1-8	1-9
2. Supervisory Controls	2-1 or 2-2	2-2	2-3	2-4	2-4	2-4	2-5	2-5
3. Guidelines	3-1	3-2	3-3	3-3	3-4	3-4	3-5	3-5
4. Complexity	4-2	4-2 or 4-3	4-3	4-4	4-4 or 4-5	4-5	4-5	4-6
5. Scope and Effect	5-1	5-2	5-3	5-3	5-4	5-4 or 5-5	5-5	5-6
6. Personal Contacts	6-1 or 6-2	6-2	6-2 or 6-3	6-3	6-3	6-3	6-3	6-3 or 6-4
7. Purpose of Contacts	7-1	7-1 or 7-2	7-2 or 7-3	7-2 or 7-3	7-3	7-3	7-3 or 7-4	7-3 or 7-4
8. Physical Demands	8-1 or 8-2	8-1 or 8-2	8-1 or 8-2	8-1 or 8-2	8-1 or 8-2	8-1 or 8-2	8-1 or 8-2	8-1 or 8-2
9. Work Environment	9-1 or 9-2	9-1 or 9-2	9-1 or 9-2	9-1 or 9-2	9-1 or 9-2	9-1 or 9-2	9-1 or 9-2	9-1 or 9-2

**Table 2 ADMINISTRATIVE WORK**

<b>FACTOR LEVELS</b>	<b>GS-05</b>	<b>GS-07</b>	<b>GS-09</b>	<b>GS-11</b>	<b>GS-12</b>	<b>GS-13</b>	<b>GS-14</b>
1. Knowledge Required by the Position	1-5	1-6	1-6	1-7	1-7	1-8	1-8
2. Supervisory Controls	2-1 or 2-2	2-2	2-3	2-4	2-4	2-4	2-5
3. Guidelines	3-1	3-2	3-3	3-3	3-4	3-4	3-5
4. Complexity	4-2	4-2 or 4-3	4-3	4-4	4-4 or 4-5	4-5	4-5
5. Scope and Effect	5-1	5-2	5-3	5-3	5-4	5-4 or 5-5	5-5
6. Personal Contacts	6-1 or 6-2	6-2	6-2 or 6-3	6-3	6-3	6-3	6-3
7. Purpose of Contacts	7-1	7-1 or 7-2	7-2 or 7-3	7-2 or 7-3	7-3	7-3	7-3 or 7-4
8. Physical Demands	8-1	8-1	8-1	8-1	8-1	8-1	8-1
9. Work Environment	9-1	9-1	9-1	9-1	9-1	9-1	9-1

**Table 3 TECHNICAL WORK**

<b>FACTOR LEVELS</b>	<b>GS-02</b>	<b>GS-03</b>	<b>GS-04</b>	<b>GS-05</b>	<b>GS-06</b>	<b>GS-07</b>	<b>GS-08</b>	<b>GS-09</b>
1. Knowledge Required by the Position	1-2	1-2	1-3	1-4	1-4	1-4 or 1-5	1-5	1-6
2. Supervisory Controls	2-1	2-2	2-2	2-2	2-3	2-3	2-3	2-3
3. Guidelines	3-1	3-1	3-1 or 3-2	3-2	3-2	3-2 or 3-3	3-3	3-3
4. Complexity	4-1	4-2	4-2	4-2	4-2	4-3	4-3	4-3 or 4-4
5. Scope and Effect	5-1	5-1	5-2	5-2	5-2 or 5-3	5-3	5-3	5-3
6. Personal Contacts	6-1	6-1 or 6-2	6-2	6-2	6-2	6-2	6-2	6-2
7. Purpose of Contacts	7-1	7-1	7-1	7-1	7-2	7-2	7-2	7-2
8. Physical Demands	8-1 or 8-2	8-1 or 8-2	8-1 or 8-2	8-1 or 8-2	8-1 or 8-2	8-1 or 8-2	8-1 or 8-2	8-1 or 8-2
9. Work Environment	9-1 or 9-2	9-1 or 9-2	9-1 or 9-2	9-1 or 9-2	9-1 or 9-2	9-1 or 9-2	9-1 or 9-2	9-1 or 9-2



**Table 4 CLERICAL AND ASSISTANCE WORK**

<b>FACTOR LEVELS</b>	<b>GS-01</b>	<b>GS-02</b>	<b>GS-03</b>	<b>GS-04</b>	<b>GS-05</b>	<b>GS-06</b>	<b>GS-07</b>
1. Knowledge Required by the Position	1-1	1-2	1-2	1-3	1-3	1-4	1-4
2. Supervisory Controls	2-1	2-1	2-2	2-2	2-2	2-2	2-3
3. Guidelines	3-1	3-1	3-1	3-2	3-2	3-3	3-3
4. Complexity	4-1	4-1	4-2	4-2	4-3	4-3	4-3
5. Scope and Effect	5-1	5-1	5-1	5-2	5-2	5-2 or 5-3	5-3
6. Personal Contacts	6-1	6-1	6-1 or 6-2	6-2	6-2	6-2	6-2
7. Purpose of Contacts	7-1	7-1	7-1	7-1	7-1 or 7-2	7-1 or 7-2	7-2
8. Physical Demands	8-1	8-1	8-1	8-1	8-1	8-1	8-1
9. Work Environment	9-1	9-1	9-1	9-1	9-1	9-1	9-1

## CHAPTER 3, POSITION DESCRIPTIONS

A position description, commonly called a "PD" by Federal workers, documents the major duties, responsibilities, and organizational relationships of a job. Because it serves as the official record of the classification of the job and is used to make many other personnel decisions, it should be written in clear, concise, and easy to understand language. [For more information on the use and development of position descriptions, see the [Introduction to the Position Classification Standards](#).]

Each agency determines who will prepare position descriptions. Depending on individual circumstances within an organization, the position description may be written by the employee in the job, the supervisor or manager, a personnel specialist, or any combination of these.

Position descriptions are written in one of two basic formats: narrative or FES. Narrative descriptions are most often used when the classification standard(s) covering the position is in a narrative, or non-FES, format. The FES format should be used when the grade of the position is determined by an FES standard because all the information pertinent to application of the FES factors may not be included in a narrative description. An FES position description, on the other hand, normally will include sufficient information to classify a position using either a narrative or an FES standard. Because of this, and because most new standards are issued in FES, many agencies have decided to prepare all position descriptions following the FES factor format.

OPM considers a position description to be adequate for classification purposes when it is--

- considered so by one knowledgeable of the occupational field involved and of the application of pertinent classification standards, principles, and policies; and
- supplemented by otherwise accurate, available, and current information on the organization, functions, programs, and procedures concerned.

The following guidance may assist in reaching this "standard of adequacy" and help make writing position descriptions a little easier.

**NOTE:** All position descriptions, whether in narrative or FES format, must include a statement by the supervisor attesting to the accuracy of the description.

## NARRATIVE POSITION DESCRIPTIONS

A narrative description generally includes four different kinds of information.

1. *Introduction* - a statement of the primary purpose of the position and its relationship to the organization;
2. *Major Duties and Responsibilities* - a statement of the important, regular, and recurring duties and responsibilities assigned to the position;
3. *Controls Over the Position* - a statement of how the work is assigned, the kind of supervision and guidance received, and the kind of review given to work in process or upon completion; and
4. *Special Qualification Requirements* - a statement of any valid knowledge, skill, education, certification, etc., required by the position if it is not readily apparent from reading the description, such as level of typing skill, foreign language proficiency, or licensure.

Position classification categorizes, measures, and assigns a grade to the significant and substantive features of a position. It is, therefore, generally necessary to describe only the major duties and other important aspects of the position that may affect the final classification. Generally, major duties are those that occupy a significant portion of the employee's time. They should be only those duties currently assigned, observable, identified with the position's purpose and organization, and expected to continue or recur on a regular basis over a period of time, such as one year. The period of time considered should cover the full cycle of duties performed. This may vary from a few months for very simple clerical work to a more lengthy period for work that involves long term cases or projects. [For a discussion on "Determining the Duties to be Classified," see the [Introduction to the Position Classification Standards](#).]

It is not necessary to describe in detail the specific steps needed to carry out a duty; normally a few well chosen words will cover the work sufficiently. It may be helpful to indicate estimates of time spent on various duties, especially when the duties appear to be at different grade levels.

Because minor duties normally do not affect the classification of the position, are usually unimportant to work operations, and change frequently, it is generally not necessary to mention them in the position description. A statement, such as "Performs other duties as assigned," covers such situations adequately. Sometimes, however, minor duties can influence both grade and series determinations and the qualifications required for the work. In cases such as these, what seem to be minor duties must be described and evaluated.

The order in which duties are described may vary. Some positions are more easily described by stating the duties in order of their importance; some by following the sequence in which the work is performed; and others by grouping the duties according to function. When the

position is assigned work in more than one series or function, it is preferable to describe and group the duties of each series or function together for ease of classification.

Reviewing appropriate classification standards before developing position descriptions often makes the standards easier to use. If the standard for a particular kind of work refers, for example, to certain characteristics of a program or occupation as factors to be considered in classification, then it is helpful if position descriptions include information on these characteristics.

A good description is one that is a forthright presentation of the work assigned to a position. Avoid using general or indefinite terms, vague expressions, unnecessary detail, and repetition. Statements of duties are often clearest when they include a strong action verb and a noun that together define a duty or task. Misleading words serve no purpose. For example, "conducts research" should not be used for "searches files." Similarly, phrases that convey no meaning outside the immediate office should be eliminated wherever possible, such as names of forms, abbreviations, and acronyms. Statements that rely heavily on adjectives and adverbs and form conclusions and judgments do not add to the quality of the description, e.g., "performs difficult work." Finally, including specific names of organizations, projects, or assignments only makes the position description become outdated faster. It is better to describe the work performed rather than detailing names, places, dates, etc.

## **FES POSITION DESCRIPTIONS**

The FES factor format is the distinctive way in which descriptions for positions covered by FES standards are written. This format consists of a brief listing of the major duties followed by a description of those duties in terms of the nine FES evaluation factors. The FES factor format is valuable because it matches exactly the way FES classification standards are written. Therefore, we would expect that agencies will write descriptions in FES format for those jobs covered by an FES standard. (While there are differences between narrative and FES descriptions, the guidance described above for narrative descriptions is useful for developing descriptions of both kinds.)

Two or more distinctly different kinds or levels of work in one position, as in a mixed series and/or mixed grade position, must be evaluated separately to determine the proper grade. When describing work under the FES factors, be particularly careful to show any significant differences in the way the factors apply to the different kinds or levels of work. It is not necessary to describe the nine factors for each kind or level if the differences can be explained in a sentence or phrase in the factor level description.

After assembling all the facts about the position and reviewing applicable classification standards and agency guides or instructions, it is time to develop the position description. The following material outlines the important considerations for writing each part of the description.

*Major Duties* - The "Major Duties" section answers the question, "What does the employee do in this position?" It should briefly describe the major duties performed in plain, clear language. It may be preceded by an introductory statement or paragraph that describes the general nature of the position and how it fits into the organization. If it is necessary to describe incidental or occasional duties, explain how often they occur, for example, "once a month..." or "in the absence of...."

The statements of major duties and the descriptions of the evaluation factors should complement one another. That is, the major duties should outline and supplement the factor descriptions.

*FES Factors* - Several of the nine FES factors have two or three individual concepts or subfactors that, when described, provide the information necessary to determine the grade of the position. Each of the FES factors is discussed below. [Chapter 2, "The Factor Evaluation System,"](#) includes a summary of each factor and its subfactors. Refer to this summary as well as to the appropriate standard for help when developing a position description.

## **FACTOR 1, KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED BY THE POSITION**

This factor answers two questions:

- what kind and level of knowledge and skills are needed; and
- how are they used in doing the work.

Under FES, the knowledge factor includes information or facts the employee must know to do the work. Sometimes a description of a skill requirement, which is generally observable, will be more precise. Show only the knowledge and skills essential for full performance of the work. Generally four or five statements are enough.

Do not describe educational, licensure, certification requirements, or degrees of proficiency unless these requirements can be validated. Include special knowledge or skill requirements that are essential to successful performance and would be used as selective factors for recruitment. (Supervisors and staffing specialists can help determine these requirements.) Factor 1 does not credit personal characteristics, such as patience or creativity; they are considered inherently in other factors. The following are brief examples of statements appropriate for this factor.

- Professional knowledge of civil engineering to design flood control structures;
- Knowledge of English grammar, spelling, and punctuation to correct obvious errors in draft material;

- Competitive level typing skill to produce documents on a personal computer using word processing software; or
- Skill in conversational Spanish to interview witnesses.

## **FACTOR 2, SUPERVISORY CONTROLS**

This factor includes:

- how the work is assigned;
- what the employee's responsibility is for carrying out the work; and
- how the work is reviewed.

The first subfactor considers how the supervisor defines assignments to the employee. For example, a supervisor might assign work with: detailed instructions on how to do the work; instructions only for new, difficult, or unusual aspects of the work; suggestions for procedures to follow; or only information about the objectives, priorities, and deadlines.

The employee's responsibility measures the degree of independence the employee has in making decisions. For example: an employee might work exactly as instructed; refer situations not covered by instructions to the supervisor; or handle all work independently according to established policies and accepted practices.

The nature and extent of review of positions range from close and detailed, to spot check, to general review. Note that it is not just the degree of independence that is evaluated, but also the degree to which the nature of the work allows the employee to make decisions and commitments and to exercise judgment. For example, many clerical employees perform their work with considerable independence and receive very general review. This work is evaluated, however, at the lower levels of this factor because there is limited opportunity to exercise judgment and initiative.

The following illustrate how this factor could appear in a position description.

- The supervisor assigns work, advises on changes in procedures, and is available for assistance when required.
- Routine work is performed independently following set procedures. The work is reviewed for accuracy through spot checks, through complaints from customers, and through observation of the employee at work.
- The supervisor assigns work in terms of project objectives and basic priorities and is available for consultation in resolving controversial issues.

- The employee independently plans and carries out the projects and selects the approaches and methods to be used in solving problems.
- Completed projects are reviewed to determine that objectives have been met and are in compliance with agency policies and regulations.

### **FACTOR 3, GUIDELINES**

This factor has two subfactors:

- the kind of guidelines used in doing the work; and
- how much judgment is needed to use them.

The first subfactor addresses the guides themselves. Employees may use guides, such as desk manuals, agency regulations, standard operating procedures, handbooks, policies, and precedents. It is not necessary to list every specific guideline used or to list a guide by its actual name. For example, "agency regulations covering voucher processing" is far more meaningful than "XYZ Regulation 3210."

Specific instructions, procedures, and policies may limit the opportunity to interpret or adapt the guidelines. On the other hand, the absence of directly applicable guidelines may require the employee to use considerable judgment in adapting current or developing new guidance.

The following are brief examples of descriptions for this factor.

- Written and oral guides provide specific instructions for doing the work.
- Most of these instructions are easily memorized and require little interpretation. When instructions do not apply, the problem is referred to the supervisor.
- Guidelines include agency regulations and directives, manufacturers' catalogs and handbooks, precedents, and files of previous projects.
- These guidelines are generally applicable, but the employee makes adaptations in dealing with problems and unusual situations.

## FACTOR 4, COMPLEXITY

The three parts of this factor consider:

- the nature of the assignment;
- what the employee considers when deciding what must be done; and
- how difficult and original are the employee's actions or responses.

It is important to study the applicable FES standard before describing this factor because the kind of information needed differs from occupation to occupation.

Characterize the work in terms of the nature and variety of the tasks, methods, functions, projects, or programs carried out. This factor level should illustrate how the employee applies the knowledge and skills described in Factor 1.

Some employees have little or no choice about how to perform the work. Others may have to develop, analyze, or evaluate information before the work can progress. The level of difficulty in carrying out the work varies depending on whether the facts or conditions are clear-cut and apply directly to the problem or issue; vary according to the nature of the subject matter, phase, or problem handled; or involve unusual circumstances and incomplete or conflicting data.

In some situations the work is mastered easily, and the employee takes the obvious course of action. The level of difficulty and originality increases as the employee considers differences in courses of action and refines methods or develops new techniques, concepts, theories, or programs to solve problems.

The following examples show how descriptions for this factor level can differ depending on the occupation.

### *Mail Clerk -*

- The assignment involves opening, sorting, and routing mail by general subject matter to approximately 150 delivery points and by specialized subject matter to 70 or 80 points.
- The employee examines the content of a variety of materials to identify and associate subject matter with closely related technical units.
- The employee determines proper routing or other action to take.



*Engineer -*

- Projects involve developing designs, plans, and specifications for a variety of utility systems for multistory buildings.
- The engineer considers factors, such as unusual local conditions, increased emphasis on energy conservation, and the relationship of problems and practices related to engineering fields.
- In making decisions the employee is often required to depart from past approaches and to extend traditional techniques or develop new ones to meet major objectives without compromising design and engineering principles.

**FACTOR 5, SCOPE AND EFFECT**

This factor includes:

- the purpose of the work; and
- the impact of the work product.

The first subfactor states the objective to be achieved. This may involve the conclusions reached and decisions or recommendations made; treatment or service provided; results of tests or research performed; or approvals or denials made. Do not confuse this subfactor with Factor 4, Complexity. Factor 4 deals with how the work is done to fulfill the purpose described in Factor 5.

The impact of the work product or service identifies who or what benefits from the employee's work and how this benefit is realized. Consider only the effect of properly performed work. When "responsibility for accuracy" is critical in a position, it should be reflected in the complexity involved and the special knowledge required.

The examples below show how to describe this factor for different kinds of work.

*File Clerk -*

- The purpose of the work is to maintain control and reference files for incoming correspondence.
- The work contributes to the efficiency of daily operations of the organization.

*Engineer -*

- The purpose of the work is to provide technical expertise in the design of...
- This work affects the quality of designs of mechanical systems aboard floating plants and equipment used in dredging activities throughout the agency nationwide.

**FACTOR 6, PERSONAL CONTACTS**

This is a one part factor covering the people contacted and the conditions under which the contacts take place. Creditable contacts are those made both face-to-face and by telephone. Describe contacts in terms of the work relationship, unusual circumstances in arranging the exchange, problems in identifying the role or authority of those taking part, or use of different ground rules in different situations. Do not include contacts with supervisors in this factor; they are credited under Factor 2.

**FACTOR 7, PURPOSE OF CONTACTS**

This one part factor explains the purpose of the contacts described in Factor 6. This factor can be described by the following examples: to give or exchange information; to resolve problems; to provide service; to motivate, influence, or interrogate persons; or to justify, defend, negotiate, or settle matters. As appropriate, information that could affect the nature of the contacts can be covered. This might include, for example, dealing with people who are skeptical, uncooperative, unreceptive, or hostile; or, settling controversial issues or arriving at compromise solutions with people who have different viewpoints, goals, or objectives.

Factors 6 and 7 presume that the same contacts will be evaluated for both factors. Therefore, use the same personal contacts that serve as the basis for the level selected for Factor 7 when selecting a level for Factor 6.

**FACTOR 8, PHYSICAL DEMANDS**

This one part factor describes the nature of physical demands placed on the employee. Efforts such as climbing, lifting, stooping, and reaching can be important. The factor level should state how often and how intense the activity is and should include any physical characteristics or special abilities needed, such as specific agility or dexterity requirements. This factor relates to the application of the knowledge and skills mentioned in Factor 1.

**FACTOR 9, WORK ENVIRONMENT**

This one part factor describes the physical surroundings in which the employee works and any special safety regulations or precautions that the employee must observe to avoid

mishaps or discomfort. It is not necessary to describe normal everyday safety precautions, such as use of safe work practices in an office or observance of fire regulations and traffic signals. This factor relates to the application of the knowledge and skills mentioned in Factor 1.

## **POSITION DESCRIPTIONS FOR SUPERVISORY POSITIONS**

Position descriptions for supervisory positions should contain information of the type covered by the standard or guide used to classify the position. For example, if the standard contains criteria for evaluating supervisory personnel management functions, scope and variety of operations supervised, and contacts of the position, then you should discuss those elements in the position description. There is no specific requirement that you write supervisory position descriptions in a particular format. However, it is easier to evaluate the position if the description and the standard are compatible. Position descriptions should always include a description of the kind and degree of supervision exercised, e.g., authority to plan work, assign and review work, and evaluate performance.

There should be complete agreement between the supervision given as described in the supervisor's position description and the supervision received as described in the descriptions of subordinate positions.

## **CHAPTER 4, DETERMINING THE PAY SYSTEM AND SERIES**

This chapter deals with deciding the correct pay system and series of a position. It is not an attempt to prescribe strictly a technical process, but rather to provide general guidance that applies to most classification situations. Also included is some more specific guidance that can be adapted and applied to the circumstances of each individual case.

### **UNDERSTANDING THE POSITION**

A position description represents the official record of the duties and responsibilities assigned to a position or group of positions by a supervisor or manager in order to accomplish a specific job. It is the position that is classified, not the person assigned to it. This means that the work to be performed and the requirements to do that work are evaluated. The special capabilities or qualifications of the employee generally are not factors that influence the position's classification. [For guidance on "Impact of the Person on the Job," see [Chapter 5, "Determining the Grade,"](#) in this handbook; or, see the [Introduction to the Position Classification Standards.](#)]

Understanding the position to be classified is fundamental to the process of assigning the correct title, series, and grade. The position description must be developed carefully to capture the important features of the job so that, when evaluated against appropriate classification criteria, the position can be classified properly. None of the "steps" described below have any value if they are based on inadequate or misunderstood information. [More detailed information

on the development and use of position descriptions can be found in [Chapter 3, "Position Descriptions,"](#) in this handbook; or, see the [Introduction to the Position Classification Standards.](#)]

Important to fully understanding the position is consideration of such factors as the position's relationship to other positions, its primary purpose or reason for existence, the mission and responsibility of the organization in which it is located, and the qualifications required to do the work. It is helpful to review organization charts, mission and function statements, technical and procedural manuals, classification standards and agency guides, position description files, and any other available documents relating to the position. Supervisors and managers can be helpful, and often essential, sources of information.

There should be as much agreement as possible concerning the position between the classifier, the supervisor, and the employee, while always keeping in mind that supervisors and managers have the ultimate responsibility for defining the position. Much, if not most, classification disagreement results from a difference in understanding and lack of communication among those concerned.

### *The Position Audit*

One of the surest ways to achieve the most complete understanding of a position is to gain first hand knowledge through a "desk audit." A desk audit is no more than a conversation or interview with the person in the job, or with the supervisor of the position, or sometimes with both, usually at the work location. The purpose of an audit is to gain as much information as possible about the position. This information, combined with an analysis of other available material about the job and the organization, can help to verify details and resolve questions.

The following are some suggestions that may help to make the audit more successful.

- Prepare for the audit by reviewing appropriate position descriptions and other background material. Become familiar with any problems or questions you may encounter during the audit.
- Make arrangements in advance and schedule the meeting at a convenient time. Clear your visit through appropriate channels, arrive on time, and report to the proper person.
- Establish a pleasant atmosphere by speaking about something of current interest for a minute or two. Employees often view an impending audit with some degree of apprehension, so it is up to you to clarify the reason for the audit, to explain the classification process, and to make an effort to put everyone at ease.
- If possible, conduct the audit at the worksite or nearby where the employee is generally more comfortable. This allows you to see the work being done, tools or equipment used, and examples of work products.

- Keep the audit conversational. Start with general questions that lead to more specific ones. Phrase questions that will result in information pertinent to the classification of the position. It may be helpful to begin by asking the employee to state as briefly as possible the basic purpose of the job.
- Show interest in the work and respect for the employee. Be objective and never argumentative. Avoid using leading questions that might confuse the employee or create a defensive atmosphere. Points in question can be clarified later with the supervisor.
- Return to the subject if the conversation wanders. This can be done by briefly summarizing a point and then asking a direct question.
- Take notes after asking permission to do so. If your note-taking seems to inhibit the other person, stop. You may then ask the employee to help you make brief notes at the end of the audit.
- Conclude the audit when you have enough information. Thank the employee and leave the way open to further contact either in person or by phone to clarify points or obtain more information.
- Document the audit by recording important facts, e.g., date, organization, employee's name, position, and information gathered about the work including examples to illustrate points that were raised.
- Confirm the facts as necessary with the supervisor before you write the position description.

## **DETERMINING THE PAY SYSTEM**

The pay system is the first decision to make when classifying a position. Most classifiers are concerned only with decisions regarding coverage by the General Schedule (GS) and the Federal Wage System (FWS). The law exempts from coverage by the General Schedule employees in positions having trade, craft, or laboring experience and knowledge as the paramount requirements. The Federal Wage System covers these positions.

As a general rule, decisions regarding the pay system are not difficult to make and are virtually automatic. Classifiers rarely face problems in this area. For a few positions, however, the lines between the pay systems are not totally clear, and you must look at individual positions carefully before arriving at a final decision. The [Introduction to the Position Classification Standards](#) provides guidance on deciding whether positions are covered by the General Schedule or the Federal Wage System.

By law OPM has final authority to determine if a position is exempt from the General Schedule. If an agency is unable to determine coverage, the agency should request a decision from OPM through agency channels.

## DETERMINING THE SERIES

The General Schedule classification system consists of twenty-two broad occupational groups. Each group includes separate series that represent occupations in that group. Selecting the proper series for a position places it with other positions assigned similar work and requiring similar qualifications.

For a variety of reasons, selection of the correct series for a position is an essential part of the entire personnel management process. For example, qualification requirements used in recruiting are based on the series of the position; career ladders are influenced by the series; organizational structures are often designed with consideration of the series of assigned positions.

General Schedule series can be divided into five "categories" of work. These include:

- *professional*, e.g., attorney, medical officer, biologist;
- *administrative*, e.g., personnel management specialist, budget analyst, general supply specialist;
- *technical*, e.g., forestry technician, accounting technician, pharmacy technician;
- *clerical*, e.g., secretary, office automation clerk, data transcriber, mail clerk; and
- *other*, e.g., firefighter, various law enforcement occupations.

Series within these categories of work are either two grade interval or one grade interval. This designation refers to the typical grade level pattern for a particular occupation. Two grade interval series progress by two grade increments from GS-05 to GS-11 and include professional and administrative occupations. (From GS-11 through GS-15, these series follow a one grade interval pattern.) One grade interval series include clerical and technical occupations and progress from GS-01 by single grade increments. Series that fall in the "other" category can be either one or two grade interval depending on the kind of work. [See also the [Introduction to the Position Classification Standards](#), [Work Covered by the General Schedule](#), and [Appendix 1, List of Series for which a Two-Grade Interval Pattern is Normal](#).]

Selecting the correct series depends heavily on your knowledge of both the standards and the position concerned. While the principal duties, responsibilities, and qualification requirements of the position should be closely related to the work covered by an occupational series, they do not have to be perfectly matched. It is helpful to refer to the [qualification](#)

standard for the occupation as well as for related occupations and to the Handbook of Occupational Groups and Families when deciding the best series to use.

The series determination is not a difficult problem for most positions. The correct series is usually apparent from reviewing the duties and responsibilities assigned to the position. For example, it is easy to tell the difference between an attorney and a mathematician, or between a secretary and a social science technician. In most cases, the occupational series will represent the primary work of the position, the highest level of work performed, and the paramount qualifications required.

For other positions the decision is more difficult. The mix of duties and responsibilities makes deciding the occupational series harder. For these positions the most appropriate series depends on many factors that may ultimately influence the proper classification of the position. The following sections provide general guidance on how to decide the appropriate series for various kinds and combinations of work.

### *Professional or Nonprofessional Series*

In some cases it may be difficult to differentiate between professional and technical work based solely on the assigned duties and responsibilities. This can be especially true among positions in the sciences or engineering where technicians carry out highly exacting tasks and complicated sequences of operation. To make the proper series determination, you must consider the characteristics of each kind of assignment.

Work classified to a professional series requires education and training in the principles, concepts, and theories of the occupation. Typically, these can be gained only through completion of a specified curriculum at a recognized college or university. This requirement is called a "positive education requirement" and is common to nearly all professional occupational series.

Professional work involves creativity, analysis, evaluation, and interpretation. It involves applying basic or natural law, principles, or theory; evaluating the research of others; and assessing the need for and validity of proposed changes and improvements in procedures and methods. Professional responsibility involves the ability to reason from existing knowledge to unexplored areas; to adapt methods to circumstances that deviate from the standards; and to stay abreast of and evaluate technical subjects, analyses, and proposals in professional literature.

Closely allied to professional work is work performed by nonprofessional support personnel. Their duties and responsibilities, especially at the higher levels, may appear very similar to those of professional employees in related kinds of work. Technical work, however, is normally planned and managed by professional employees. The technician carries out or implements plans or projects based on extensive experience and supplemental on-the-job training rather than on formal academic education in the discipline itself. Technical or nonprofessional work is performed typically in a narrow or highly specialized area of the overall occupation and requires a high degree of practical knowledge and skill. The experienced technician often works with considerable independence for significant periods of time. This

independence, however, does not alter the nature and character of the work, which is to support a professional discipline.

Positions can be considered professional only if the work *requires* application of professional knowledge and ability. *Neither the desirability of such qualifications nor the employee's possession of them is a factor in determining the series.*

Whenever there is a question of whether to classify a position in a professional or nonprofessional series, you must consider the following points that are common to all professional positions:

- the work requires application of professional knowledge and skills;
- management has decided that the work is to be performed following accepted professional methods and practices; and
- the employee in the position meets the professional qualification requirements for the occupation.

**NOTE:** All series that cover professional work are identified in the series definitions found in the [Handbook of Occupational Groups and Families](#).

### *Administrative or Support Series*

The distinctions are not always obvious between positions properly classified in two grade interval administrative series and those classified in one grade interval support series. Assistant duties can be found in some administrative positions and vice versa. Some tasks are common to both types of occupations, particularly at the higher levels of support work. To decide the proper series, consider the characteristics and requirements of the work as well as management's intent for establishing the position.

Support work usually involves proficiency in one or more functional areas or in certain limited phases of a specified program. Normally a support position can be identified with the mission of a particular organization or program. The work usually does not require knowledge of the interrelationships among functional areas or organizations.

Employees who perform support work follow established methods and procedures. They may occasionally develop work plans or recommend new procedures, but these typically are related to the employee's individual assignment or immediate work unit. Support work can be performed based on a practical knowledge of the purpose, operation, procedures, techniques, and guidelines of the specific program area or functional assignment. Support personnel typically learn to do the work on the job through what may sometimes be many years of experience. They also may attend specific training courses related to their work.

Administrative work, on the other hand, primarily requires a high order of analytical ability combined with a comprehensive knowledge of (1) the functions, processes, theories, and



principles of management; and (2) the methods used to gather, analyze, and evaluate information. Administrative work also requires skill in applying problem solving techniques and skill in communicating effectively both orally and in writing. Administrative positions do not require specialized education, but they do involve the type of skills (analysis, research, writing, judgment) typically gained through college level education or through progressively responsible experience.

Even though employees who perform administrative work may be assigned to one functional area of an overall occupation or program, they are required to understand the interrelationships between their specific area of expertise and other functions and programs. Often the knowledge and experience gained in one particular functional area increases the opportunity for movement to other related areas of work.

Administrative work often involves planning for and developing systems, functions, and services; formulating, developing, recommending, and establishing policies, operating methods, or procedures; and adapting established policy to the unique requirements of a particular program.

You must take into account the career ladder in which the position is located. If the duties are clearly developmental and designed as preparation for a higher level of administrative work, then the position is properly classified in a two grade interval administrative series. If management intends that the duties assigned are to be performed without potential for reaching the grade level of full performance administrative work, then classify the position in a clerical or support series.

### *Mixed Series*

A "mixed series" position involves work covered by more than one occupational series. For most positions, the grade-controlling work determines the series. Sometimes, however, the lower grade duties are more closely related to the basic purpose of the position. Consider, for example, a position classified as Secretary (Stenography), GS-0318-05. The secretarial duties are at the GS-04 level, and the stenography duties are at GS-05. In this case the position is not classified in the series of the grade controlling work but in the Secretary Series, which best represents the main purpose of the position and the paramount knowledge required.

When the work of the position is covered by two or more series in one occupational group and no one series predominates, use the general series for that group, typically the -01 series, for the position. Use the general series also for positions that are not covered properly by any other series in the group but are related closely to the work of the group.

When the work of the position falls into more than one occupational group, the proper series may be more difficult to determine. You must consider a number of factors as described below regarding the position. Consider these factors together, since no single one necessarily will result in the most logical decision.

*Paramount knowledge required:* Most positions have a paramount knowledge requirement even though there may be several different kinds of work assigned to the position. The paramount knowledge is the most important type of subject matter knowledge or experience required to do the work.

*Reason for existence:* The primary purpose of the position or management's intent in establishing the position is a positive indicator to the appropriate series.

*Organizational function:* The mission or function of an organization can often provide an indication of the appropriate series for a position. Thus, for example, the Supply Clerical and Technician Series, GS-2005, may be the most appropriate series for a position located in a supply services organization and assigned supply, procurement, and financial clerical duties. On the other hand, a similar position located in an acquisitions organization may be classified better in the Procurement Clerical and Technician Series, GS-1106.

*Line of promotion:* The normal line of promotion for the position and/or similar positions in the organization frequently will indicate the occupational specialization toward which the position is oriented.

*Recruitment source:* Supervisors and managers can help by identifying the occupational areas that provide the best qualified applicants to do the work.

### *Interdisciplinary Professional Series*

An alternate method for determining the series for some professional positions is the interdisciplinary approach. An interdisciplinary position involves duties and responsibilities that are closely related to more than one professional occupation. As a result, the knowledge and experience requirements can be met by persons qualified in either of the professional series involved. Interdisciplinary classification is used principally for positions in mathematical, scientific, or engineering disciplines. Other combinations of work and qualification requirements logically would not meet the intent of interdisciplinary.

Occasionally, the question of extending this approach to administrative positions arises. The "interdisciplinary" concept is based on the fact that professional occupations represent recognized academic disciplines. Nearly all professional occupations have a specified amount and kind of education required for entry. Related disciplines often have a common core of education and experience. This "commonality" sometimes allows people qualified in more than one discipline to be eligible for a single set of duties and responsibilities.

Administrative occupations are, in contrast, experience based. That is, they do not require education in a specific field of study. Persons with appropriate experience can qualify for nonprofessional or administrative positions if they have gained through experience the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to do the work. The interdisciplinary approach, therefore, is neither needed nor appropriate for administrative occupations.

This method for determining series is used for the sole purpose of adding flexibility to staffing professional positions. This flexibility allows the qualification requirements for the position to extend beyond those for a single series. It is a means for the classification system to respond to the needs of the staffing process. You should keep this in mind when deciding if this is the most appropriate way to classify a position. Supervisors and staffing specialists can often help make this decision.

Generally, when a position involves work or knowledge pertaining to more than one profession, classification to the predominant series is preferable and the most practical solution. The fact that an assignment requires some additional knowledge of other professional disciplines does not ordinarily affect the series determination.

Some positions involve specialized work common to several professions in a broad occupational group or work that is not readily identifiable with an established series. The general, or -01, series for the occupational group is normally the most appropriate for these positions. In some cases, however, an interdisciplinary approach may be used if it better satisfies the particular situation.

True interdisciplinary positions, then, fall into one of two categories.

First, positions that involve a specific combination of knowledges characteristic of two or more specific professional series. Such positions are assigned some duties that are characteristic of one profession and other duties that are characteristic of another profession. If neither predominates, or if the agency does not want to limit recruitment to a single discipline, the interdisciplinary procedure may be used.

Second, positions that involve knowledge characteristic of either of two or more professional series or academic disciplines. In this case, the duties assigned to the position can be classified in either of the series involved, and the work can, therefore, be performed by an employee qualified in either of the disciplines.

In order to be designated interdisciplinary, the professions or disciplines involved must be logically compatible. There must also be an obvious degree of commonality in the core education, knowledge, and experience necessary to meet the qualification requirements of either profession.

As a practical matter, the position descriptions for these positions must state that they are interdisciplinary, and show the tentative classification (title, series, and grade) for each profession. The final classification of the position is based on the qualifications of the employee selected and is recorded on the position description once the position is filled.

## CHAPTER 5, DETERMINING THE GRADE

Experienced classifiers normally do not encounter difficulty when deciding the grade of most positions. Some positions, however, can present a real challenge. You must recognize and evaluate positions involving work that is atypical, that is undergoing rapid change, and that deviates from normal patterns.

Most positions have predominant duties and responsibilities that clearly indicate the real purpose for which the position has been established. These duties and responsibilities almost always control the grade level of the position. It is when classification considerations are not clear-cut that grade level decisions can become more difficult.

### APPLICATION OF STANDARDS

OPM prepares classification standards on the assumption that the people using them are either personnel specialists or managers trained in how to classify positions and knowledgeable about the occupations and organizations concerned. Regardless of the specific format of the standard, you must consider and apply it as a *guide* to grade level decisions. You should not use grade level criteria mechanically to match or "force fit" a position to specific elements, factors, situations, or duties. You must always use sound classification judgment to determine the extent to which an individual job fits the *intent* of the standard.

Standards do not describe all possible kinds or combinations of work in a particular occupation. This would be impossible because of the changes that occur so frequently in how some work is assigned and performed and in how some missions and organizations are structured. An attempt to completely describe how work is structured in all components of all agencies also would be an impossible task. In any case, the final evaluation decision is based on an evaluation of the whole position against appropriate grade level criteria following established classification policy and procedure.

A group of positions in the same occupational series may encompass a considerable variety and combination of specific types of duties at the same grade level. A grade level represents a band or range of difficulty. Therefore, you must be careful to ensure that the grade level decision is compatible with the grade concept in the standard. Differences in the work assigned to positions are often assumed to imply differences in grade level. In fact, these differences may simply represent variations within the range of a grade level.

It is essential that you consider the intent of any standard when applying it to a specific job. Intent is determined by considering the standard as a whole. This means that full weight is given to--

background and occupational information;

descriptions used to illustrate successive grade levels;

changes in the nature of the work not reflected in the standard; and  
significant classification features in the job that are not addressed in the standard.

### **USING GRADE OR FACTOR LEVELS NOT DESCRIBED IN PUBLISHED STANDARDS**

Classification standards and guides provide evaluation criteria for grade and factor levels that are typical of the occupation or kind of work covered. These levels are determined based on a review of the information gathered during the occupational study and on an analysis of all elements that influence the occupation. Omission of criteria for any grade level, however, does not preclude use of that grade level when circumstances require it.

Most narrative standards for two grade interval work do not provide grade level criteria for the intermediate grades of GS-06, 08, and 10 because these grades are seldom appropriate for either administrative or professional work. Below the GS-11 level, only the odd number grade levels described in the standard typically will be used. Because FES uses only one set of factors regardless of the occupation, it is possible that a few more even grade positions may result than previously existed. Borderline cases that cannot be satisfactorily placed at an odd number grade can be placed at an intermediate grade if that is the best classification for the position. But even when using FES criteria, these grades will rarely occur.

You may use grade levels above or below those covered in the standard if the evaluation proves that these levels are properly matched. You may do this even though grade or factor level criteria are limited to certain levels. Given the circumstances, it may be appropriate to extend the grade or factor level criteria and cross reference other standards for similar work. Positions classified like this, however, will be unusual for the particular occupation. You should make these decisions very carefully.

### **CLASSIFYING POSITIONS WHEN NO STANDARDS HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED**

The law requires that each position be classified to the appropriate series and grade according to standards issued by OPM. If no directly applicable standard has been issued, then positions must be classified consistent with OPM standards covering other occupations. [For more information on selecting the appropriate standard, see the [Introduction to the Position Classification Standards](#).]

For most positions the published standard for the series in which the position is classified will provide the best grade level criteria for evaluating the position. Other standards would be used primarily to confirm the initial evaluation. When no directly applicable grade level criteria have been published, you must select other standards for cross series comparison. You should

select standards that cover work as similar as possible to the work you are evaluating with respect to—

the kind of work process, function, or subject matter involved;

the qualifications (knowledge, skills, and abilities) required;

the level of difficulty and responsibility; and

the combination of classification factors that have the greatest influence on the grade level.

Because of the differences in the nature of work and the qualifications required to do various kinds of work, you should use for comparison only standards or guides that are compatible with the work being evaluated. Thus, professional positions should be evaluated against standards for professional work that is comparable in scope and difficulty, and as nearly equal as possible in subject matter and function. Standards selected for evaluating technical work should involve similar grading factors and skill levels. Clerical positions should be evaluated by standards for related kinds of clerical work or by an appropriate guide.

Positions assigned administrative work should be classified by application of standards or guides that cover occupations that are as similar as possible to the work performed and the knowledge and skills required. In rare instances, a standard for a professional occupation may provide the best source of grade level criteria for evaluating a nonprofessional position. This situation may occur when the work of the nonprofessional, or administrative, position is performed in an organization where the work is primarily professional. The administrative work may be closely related to the professional work but not require the same level of qualifications.

You must use caution and sound classification judgment when comparing administrative work to evaluation criteria for an occupation that requires professional knowledge and skills. Although assignment characteristics may appear to be similar to those described at a particular grade level in a professional series, the professional work presumes a degree of depth and perspective in the occupation not generally found in administrative work. It is important to balance carefully the duties and responsibilities and knowledge required of the administrative position with the criteria for professional work and make whatever adjustments are necessary before determining the final grade.

As when using any standard for cross series comparison, you must use care and judgment to be sure that the overall intent of a factor level or narrative description of a grade level is met. You must not match positions and grade level criteria solely on the basis of superficial similarities between organizational echelon, scope of program goals and requirements, or kind of supervision given or received. Your evaluation should not be based on a single classification factor, on a description of an isolated task or responsibility, or on words or sentences taken out of context. Rather, you must make a careful analytical comparison of the relationship of the position being evaluated with the intent of the criteria being used.

**NOTE:** When evaluating a position using FES, you are reminded that the FES Primary Standard may be used for supplemental guidance but only in conjunction with other FES standards. (For more information on using the Primary Standard, see [Chapter 2, "The Factor Evaluation System."](#))

## **FACTORS NOT CONSIDERED**

Not considered in determining the grade level of a position are issues, such as volume of work, financial need of the employee, salary comparability, quality of work, efficiency of performance, the employee's length of service, difficulty in recruiting for the occupation, or duties performed only in the absence of another employee. Other areas of the personnel management system take these considerations into account. Performance and incentive awards, the merit promotion plan, periodic step increases, and special pay rates, for example, are all tools used to deal with issues not properly resolved through the classification of positions.

## **THE EFFECT OF REVIEW OF WORK**

The work of all employees is reviewed in one way or another. Team leaders or senior workers often assist the supervisor, who has the ultimate responsibility for accepting or rejecting work, in the day-to-day review of work. The effect of review on the grade level of a position depends primarily on the kind and purpose of the review given. Generally, the grade level would not be affected if the review were primarily for the purpose of keeping informed or maintaining consistency.

The significance of review has meaning only in relation to work being done. For example, review that may appear closer than normal may actually be customary for positions involving work of a highly critical or precedent setting nature. This kind of review would not generally diminish the position's overall responsibility. Other kinds of work may receive only nominal review because of the clear cut and repetitive nature of the work, without implying any significant increase in responsibility.

Classification standards for most occupations describe typical levels of supervision that are considered in the overall evaluation of the position. The review of an employee's work as a factor by itself will affect the grade level only if it is significantly different from the kind of review given to similar kinds of work done by other employees. Closer than normal review, often indicative of a trainee position, generally would lower the grade that might otherwise result from simply evaluating the kind of work performed. On the other hand, review that is significantly less than normal may occasionally enhance the grade level of the position.

In some situations, such as keying data into an automated system, the need for accuracy may be so important that one employee double checks the work of another by repeating the work process. This is part of an overall quality control effort. Such "review" normally does not affect the grade level of either position since both employees use the same level of knowledge and skill.

## MIXED GRADE POSITIONS

OPM's policy on evaluating positions that include work classified to more than one grade level is explained in the [Introduction to the Position Classification Standards](#). In nearly all positions the duties that occupy most of the employee's time also represent the highest level of work performed. For these positions there is no question of mixed grade duties, even if some other duties are performed.

In some other positions, duties that occupy only a small portion of the employee's time are also the highest grade duties assigned to the position. The duties may be grade controlling if they--

are a regular and continuing part of the job;

are performed for at least 25% of the time; and

involve a higher level of knowledge and skill that would be a factor in recruiting for the position.

It is reasonable that a position cannot be evaluated based on numerical decisions alone. But it is also reasonable to assume that work is a substantial part of a job when it can be identified with at least a quarter of the employee's time.

The higher level of knowledge and skill is that which is typically associated with the higher graded work and would be an important factor in seeking a qualified person to fill the job. You can assume that if an employee is performing work at a given grade level, then the employee is using the knowledge and skill required for that grade level.

These concepts apply equally to supervisory and nonsupervisory duties.

## IMPACT OF THE PERSON ON THE JOB

The policy for classifying positions based on "impact of the person on the job" is described in the [Introduction to the Position Classification Standards](#). This policy is based on the premise that the special knowledge, skills, abilities, talents, or achievements of an individual may have an important effect on the duties, responsibilities, and expectations of the job held.

The impact of the person on the job is reflected in the classification when the performance of a particular individual actually makes the job materially different from what it otherwise would be. On the other hand, the mere fact that an individual in a position possesses higher qualifications or stands out from other individuals in comparable positions is not sufficient reason by itself to classify the position to a higher grade.



When determining grade level based on this concept, it is essential that management recognizes and endorses the duties and that the work environment allows continuing performance at a different level. The job description should clearly state the higher level duties and responsibilities. The position's final classification must be based on grade level criteria in appropriate standards and not merely on comparison with other jobs. As with series determination, the employee's possession of special qualifications would not affect the grade unless these qualifications are required to perform the higher level duties.

When the classification of a position has been directly affected by an individual employee, the position will normally require redescription and reevaluation when it is vacated and typically will be filled at a lower grade level.

## **IMPACT OF AUTOMATION**

Computers are an integral part of the modern work place. Both subject matter specialists and support personnel perform, at their work stations, a variety of data processing operations involving a range of problem solving, record keeping, correspondence, and work tracking operations.

Stand alone and networked computers and computer terminals provide the ability to handle large amounts of data and information. Employees use computers to solve problems and construct and manipulate models in their areas of specialization, e.g., agriculture, economics, personnel, loans, grants, supply, budget. They build, add to, and subtract from data bases; correct or change automated records; design report formats; and define and produce reports. Some employees are directly involved in defining the work processes to be automated and selecting the hardware and software to be used by themselves and others. Some employees who specialize in subject matter work also apply computer programming skills to their work, although this is rarely a requirement in the subject matter occupation.

Automation may increase productivity, but typically the basic work processes performed by employees remain substantially unchanged. The paramount subject matter knowledge, skills, and abilities also do not change. The kinds of automation involved and the skills required to use them generally replace or supplement work methods and techniques previously performed through manual or machine enhanced processes or in centralized data processing centers. Most commonly, neither the purpose of the work nor the products expected of the employee change due to the availability of a computer at the desk.

When grades do change because of automation, they are just as likely to decrease as to increase. Sometimes automation simplifies and, therefore, lowers the grades of positions. On the other hand, automation could cause some positions to expand and perform more complex duties that may result in higher grades. As classification standards are revised, the new criteria will reflect the impact of computers on individual occupations.

For positions that fall into the gray area between clearly subject matter and clearly data processing, you must use sound classification judgment to identify the purpose of the work. You must evaluate the primary qualifications required, career paths in the organization, intent of management in defining the position, and possible sources of applicants to fill the positions. The purpose of the work most often identifies the appropriate subject matter series and grade level criteria to be used. If that is unsatisfactory, you can then review other standards to resolve the title, series, and grade. You may find helpful one of the related occupational standards, such as those for the Computer Operator Series, GS-0332, Job Family Standard for Administrative Work in the Information Technology Group, GS-2200, Computer Clerk and Assistant Series, GS-0335, or the Office Automation Grade Evaluation Guide.

## CHAPTER 6, CLASSIFYING SUPERVISORY POSITIONS

The principles and policies governing the classification of supervisory positions in the Federal government are currently under study for possible revision. Because of this, extensive and detailed material concerning the classification of these positions will not be provided until this study has been completed. Additional material will be included in this section as issues are resolved and new or revised guidance is developed.

In the meantime, guidance on "Determining Base Level, "Managerial Aspects," "Special Technical Demand," and "Other Special Elements" is provided in this handbook for use when classifying supervisory positions using the [General Schedule Supervisory Guide \(GSSG\)](#).

### DETERMINING BASE LEVEL

Determining the base level; i.e., representative grade of work supervised, has always been difficult for classifiers and managers alike. As a practical matter, base level is an indirect measure of the technical demands placed upon the supervisor in assigning and reviewing the work of the unit. The demands are technical in the sense that they involve the application of knowledge and skill in the specific subject matter of the occupation(s) directed. To the extent that the supervisor is required regularly to make technical decisions concerning the base level of work, a higher base level would impose greater demands on the supervisor.

In addition to supervisory skills common to the direction of people and organizations, supervision of the base level of work in the unit normally requires recurring use of substantive technical skills and knowledge of the kind appropriate to direction of the work represented. Although the supervisor need not be as skilled in the work as all subordinates, the supervisor must have sufficient technical knowledge to plan, assign, direct, and review work operations of the unit.

The need for the supervisor to possess specific technical knowledge is generally strongest at the first line, where employees are supervised directly. Although the need for some type of technical skill persists throughout successively higher echelons of supervision and management as well, the nature of the technical knowledge required becomes necessarily more general and

diffused due to the broader variety of work and occupations directed. In summary, technical direction of the base level of work is much more intense at the first line than it is at higher echelons.

Most standards for evaluating/grading supervisory work place heavy emphasis on the base level of work supervised. A common approach in older supervisory standards was to define base level as a percentage (typically about 25%) of the substantive nonsupervisory positions in the work unit under the supervisor's control. The problem with this approach is that it does not take into account the actual workload of the unit, but instead focuses only on the GS grades of a narrowly defined segment of the workforce. Any significant change in the number of lower level or higher graded positions would affect the percentage of positions at the base level, and could in turn affect directly the supervisor's grade. Thus, there is an incentive for the supervisor to raise the base level in order to increase the grade of his or her own position. Base level determination is further complicated by other considerations, such as the number of positions at a given grade, which is not necessarily the same as the amount of work performed at that same grade in the work unit; and the amount of work at a particular grade level, which may vary from one position to the next, or within the same position over time.

Determination of the base level is essentially a four step process.

*First*, decide what work is appropriate for consideration given the location of the supervisory position in the organizational hierarchy. Include in this consideration all filled and authorized positions under the technical and administrative direction of the supervisor, regardless of whether filled by Federal civilian employees, uniformed military personnel, unpaid volunteers, or other assigned workers. The workload of a part-time position should be prorated according to its full-time equivalent; i.e., two 20 hour positions are the full-time equivalent of one 40 hour position.

*Second*, identify the occupational series and grade levels of subordinate nonsupervisory positions that carry out the workload of the unit for which the supervisor is technically and administratively responsible; i.e., the workload that the unit is essentially established to perform. Include supervision of all full performance positions and work primary to or regarded as a substantive part of the mission and functions of the unit. Do not count the work of support positions. Do not include work the grade level of which is based on independence or freedom from supervision, impact of an incumbent on the grade of the position, or supervisory duties and responsibilities. In some cases it may be necessary to arrive at a constructed grade for work that is not of the same grade level as the position in which it is performed.

*Third*, identify the approximate amount (volume) of work at each grade level. Where the staff is in training, or grades are unrelated to difficulty of work supervised, it may be necessary to arrive at a constructed or target grade for the overall workload. For example, where employees are in training, the full performance level (target grade) of the work would actually best reflect the level of the work supervised over time. In this instance, the constructed grade would be the target grade.

*Fourth*, the base level of work that should be credited is the regular and recurring nonsupervisory work that, over time, constitutes at least 25% of the workload of the substantive positions in the unit supervised.

## MANAGERIAL ASPECTS

The General Schedule Supervisory Guide (GSSG) does not measure directly the responsibility involved in managing work done by contractors. Several of the managerial categories, e.g., categories 1, 2, and 5, however, provide an opportunity to credit the additional difficulty associated with direction of contracted work.

## SPECIAL TECHNICAL DEMAND

This interpretive guidance is intended to facilitate consistent application of Element No. 3: Special Technical Demand, in GSSG. In particular, it concerns differences of opinion over the provision intended to credit the existence of nonsupervisory work above the base level when such work requires significantly higher technical ability and knowledge on the part of the supervisor.

The special technical demand element is designed to evaluate the difficulty of reviewing, for substance, work that is above the base level grade. In addition to being at a higher grade level, the work may also be different in kind; i.e., occupational series. There is, however, no requirement that the work be different in kind in order to be credited under Element No. 3. The standard specifies that "...Special technical demand may be credited when both of the following conditions are present:

- (a) There is at least one subordinate full time position, at a level above the base level of work. The employee in that position performs, as a major part of the work, nonsupervisory substantive work for which the supervisory position being evaluated is technically responsible.
- (b) The nonsupervisory substantive work concerned actually imposes on the supervisory position being evaluated a technical ability and knowledge requirement significantly higher than that needed to review work at the base level."

Condition (a) is clear cut and can be determined through observation of work processes and/or objective verification of readily available work-related documents, e.g., position descriptions, performance appraisals, and work products. The problem arises, however, in regard to interpretation of condition (b). In that regard, the primary questions are:

- what constitutes a technical ability and knowledge requirement significantly higher than that needed to review work at the base level; and

- what are acceptable indicators for verifying that the requirement for significantly higher technical ability and knowledge are met.

Grades of subordinate positions are a composite of many things, such as knowledge, complexity, scope and effect of work, and contacts. The presence or absence of special technical demand can usually not be traced to any single aspect of the job, e.g., knowledge, exclusive of all others. The decision as to whether or not supervision of positions above the base level fulfills condition (b); i.e., imposes a technical ability and knowledge requirement significantly higher than that needed to review work at the base level, is decided best through a review of work relationships and products and consideration of such issues as the following:

- is the work in question susceptible to technical review; i.e., the grade of the position(s) supervised is not based upon independence of action or unreviewed technical decisions;
- is the work of the position(s) above the base level more difficult to plan, schedule, assign, and/or review;
- to what extent does the technical review differ from that given to work at the base level; i.e., are work products more difficult to review, for example, because of the increased depth and/or breadth of subject matter encompassed;
- does the employee in the supervisory position being evaluated make decisions on technical issues assigned to positions above the base level, or are such matters resolved by subordinate supervisors; and
- does the supervisor possess the kind and level of knowledge and/or credentials appropriate to review technically the nonsupervisory substantive work in positions above the base level.

If the answers to these types of questions demonstrate the exercise of significantly higher technical knowledge and ability, then the intent of paragraph (b) is satisfied.

A finding that special technical demand can be credited does not mean, of course, that an additional grade is automatically added, even for a Degree B supervisory position covered in the GSSG. A comprehensive evaluation called for by GSSG is still required (strengths and weaknesses, alignment, grade levels involved, etc.). Although present, the additional technical demand may not be sufficient to warrant grade credit, particularly if it is counterbalanced by an offsetting weakness.