

U.S. Office of Personnel Management  
Division for Human Capital Leadership & Merit System Accountability  
Classification Appeals Programs

Chicago Field Services Group  
230 South Dearborn Street, Room 3060  
Chicago, IL 60604-1687

**Classification Appeal Decision**  
**Under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code**

**Appellant:** [appellant]

**Agency classification:** Editorial Assistant  
GS-1087-7

**Organization:** Major Land Resource Area Staff  
[state] State Conservationist Office  
Natural Resources Conservation Service  
US Department of Agriculture  
[city and state]

**OPM decision:** Editorial Assistant  
GS-1087-7

**OPM decision number:** C-1087-07-02

/s/Marta B. Pérez

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Marta Brito Pérez  
Associate Director  
Human Capital Leadership  
and Merit System Accountability

June 15, 2004  
Date

As provided in section 511.612 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, this decision constitutes a certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials of the government. The agency is responsible for reviewing its classification decisions for identical, similar, or related positions to ensure consistency with this decision. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under conditions and time limits specified in the Introduction to the Position Classification Standards, appendix 4, section G (address provided in appendix 4, section H).

**Decision sent to:**

PERSONAL

[appellant]

USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

[address]

[city and state]

State Administrative Officer

USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

[address]

[city and state]

Director, OHRM-PPPD

U.S. Department of Agriculture

J.L. Whitten Building, Room 302-W

1400 Independence Avenue, SW

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## **Introduction**

On October 21, 2003, the Chicago Field Services Group of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a classification appeal from [appellant]. Her position is currently classified as Editorial Assistant, GS-1087-07. She believes her position should be reclassified as Editor, GS-1082-09/11. The appellant works on the Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) staff, [state] State Conservationist Office, Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, [city and state]. We received the complete agency administrative report on December 01, 2003. We accepted and decided this appeal under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.).

## **Background**

In March 2001 the appellant worked with her previous supervisor and a classifier to revise her position description (PD). That revision resulted in her current PD of record [#####], dated March 28, 2001, as Editorial Assistant, GS-1087-7. Her present supervisor has also certified the accuracy of the PD. The appellant subsequently appealed the classification of her position to her agency's regional office which sustained the current classification. The appellant agrees that her PD is accurate and complete.

To help decide this appeal, we conducted a telephone audit with the appellant and interviewed her first-level supervisor on February 19, 2004. To clarify the editing and publication process, we conducted a telephone interview with a senior editor at the National Soil Survey Center, [city and state], on February 20, 2004. He provided program information concerning the steps involved in publishing soil survey reports. In deciding this appeal, we carefully considered the audit and interview findings and all information of record furnished by the appellant and the agency. We find that the PD of record contains the major duties and responsibilities assigned and performed by the appellant and we incorporate it by reference into this decision.

## **General issues**

The appellant states that her current PD is not classified properly. A PD is the official record of the major duties and responsibilities assigned to a position by a responsible agency official; i.e., a person with authority to assign work to a position. A position is the duties and responsibilities that make up the work performed by an employee. Classification appeal regulations permit OPM to investigate or audit a position and decide an appeal based on the duties assigned by management and performed by the employee. We classify a real operating position, and not simply the PD. Therefore, this decision is based on the actual work assigned to and performed by the appellant.

The appellant refers to similar positions in other MLRA offices that edit soil survey report manuscripts, but are classified in the Writing and Editing Series, GS-1082. By law, we must classify positions solely by comparing current duties and responsibilities to OPM standards and guidelines (5 U.S.C. 5106, 5107, and 5112). Since the comparison to standards is the exclusive method for classifying positions, we cannot compare the appellant's position to others as a basis for deciding her appeal.

Implicit in the appellant's rationale is a concern that her position is classified inconsistently with other positions. Like OPM, the appellant's agency must classify positions based on comparison to OPM standards and guidelines. Section 511.612 of 5 CFR requires that agencies review their own classification decisions for identical, similar, or related positions to insure consistency with OPM certificates. Thus, the agency has the primary responsibility for insuring that its positions are classified consistently with OPM appeal decisions. If the appellant considers her position so similar to warrant the same classification, she may pursue the matter by writing to her agency headquarters human resources office. In doing so, she should specify the precise organizational location, classification, duties, and responsibilities of the positions in question. If the positions are found to be basically the same as hers, the agency must correct their classification to be consistent with this appeal decision. Otherwise, the agency should explain to her the differences between her position and the others.

The appellant also makes various other statements about her agency and its evaluation of her position. Because our decision sets aside all previous agency decisions, the appellant's concerns regarding her agency's classification review process are not germane to this decision. In adjudicating this appeal, our only concern is to make our own independent decision based on the proper classification of her position.

### **Position information**

The appellant works under the general supervision of the MLRA Office Leader, (Supervisory Soil Scientist). She provides editorial support work in preparing soil survey manuscripts for publication. Soil survey manuscripts are comprised of a standardized set of technical components including maps with soil lines, graphs and tables of data, as well as a variety of narratives which are technical descriptions of the soils themselves and the geographic area in which they are found. The format and content of the document are prescribed by agency policy and/or precedent. Manuscript material is received from project leaders in various field offices within the region. The appellant uses her experience to identify any discrepancies between narrative and statistical information. She performs day-to-day work independently.

The appellant's tasks include electronically retrieving information from various databases for inclusion into manuscripts; organizing, condensing and formatting text and tables for the most logical and effective presentation; correcting grammar, punctuation, capitalization and sentence structure; coordinating the development of block diagrams of soil associations; ensuring that narrative, data, and pictorial components are presented in the correct format; checking cited references for accuracy; and preparing manuscripts for distribution. Information extracted from databases is placed in narrative and table formats to meet soil survey reporting standards. However, the content of the material is not changed.

Three Soil Data Quality Specialists are assigned to the MLRA Office to provide local review and technical assistance. They are responsible for the technical content of the work completed by project leaders in the field. While the appellant identifies and corrects obvious technical errors, substantive issues are resolved by the specialists who are responsible for the technical content of the final report.

### **Title, series, and standard determination**

The appellant believes that her position should be reclassified in the Writing and Editing Series, GS-1082, which covers positions that involve writing and editing materials, such as reports, regulations, articles, newsletters, magazines, news releases, guidebooks, reference works or scripts. The work requires the acquisition of information on a variety of subjects in the course of completing assignments, and the development, analysis, and selection of appropriate information and presentation of the information in a form and at a level suitable for the intended audience. Editors work with manuscripts prepared by others who usually are experts in their fields rather than in writing. Editors advise and assist the authors during the writing stage; verify the information presented by research or consultation with other subject experts; examine the organization, length and tone and make the necessary adjustments; edit the text for clarity and accuracy; consult on design and graphics and prepare the material for printing. They may be required to do substantial research and rewriting to organize, balance, and complete deficient manuscripts to meet publishing objectives.

The appellant states that the narrative sections and non-standard tables she reviews are specific to the soil survey being prepared, including a combination of prewritten and hand-generated materials that require extensive editing beyond basic grammar and clarity of expression. However, we found that the format and content of the final survey report document is largely set by agency policy or guidelines. She says that the interpretative tables and a very small percentage of the narrative sections that she edits are derived from a technical database that may have errors which she must correct. However, when the appellant discovers technical discrepancies, she has to contact either a project leader, or soil scientist or specialist for resolution. In addition, the appellant does not make final determinations about content, but works with various technical specialists to compile and edit the various items that ultimately comprise the total document

The appellant performs work in support of the office's two-grade interval GS-1082 functions. Unlike the appellant's work, two-grade interval work requires a high degree of analytical ability as well as intensive knowledge of the principles and practices applicable to the specific occupation. Two-grade interval administrative work typically involves analyzing and evaluating programs; formulating and recommending policies and procedures; and applying a knowledge of administrative theory in adapting practice to the unique requirements of a particular program. In contrast to GS-1082 work, the appellant's work does not require her to develop or analyze data, make changes in technical content without the advice of Soil Data Quality Specialists or project leaders, or have independent authority to approve printing of the soil survey report manuscripts.

The appellant's primary responsibility is to provide editorial support work to the MLRA Office relating to the preparation of soil survey manuscripts for publication. This work is properly classified to the Editorial Assistance Series, GS-1087, which covers positions that are involved in editorial support work in preparing manuscripts for publication and verifying factual information in them. Such support work includes editing manuscripts for basic grammar and clarity of expression as well as marking copy for format. Editorial assistants also use support skills acquired through experience in using and preparing agency publications. Some assistants do revise sentences, paragraphs and paragraph order. Editorial assistants do not need knowledge

of the substance of the subject matter of the manuscript. Their rewriting or restructuring of sentences, paragraphs, or papers is based on grammatical considerations, not the substantive subject matter. Editorial assistants observe internal factual inconsistencies in the material, such as references and citations. They verify the accuracy of statements, figures, illustrations, and subject matter terms by referring to standard reference works, to other published material, and to the author. While the appellant may discuss some needed changes with project leaders, those discrepancies of a more substantive nature are the responsibility of the Soil Data Quality Specialists in her organization who are responsible for the technical accuracy of the information in the final manuscript.

Typical of GS-1087 work, the appellant provides editorial support work in preparing soil survey manuscripts for publication. Her duties require a general knowledge of the substantive work of the MLRA office, but not a comprehensive knowledge of soil programs. Typical of one-grade interval positions, the appellant accomplishes her duties based on the application of established precedents or guidelines. Although the position requires a general understanding of the editing and publishing process, it does not require a broad and in-depth knowledge necessary to analyze and evaluate the procedures and techniques found in two-grade level editing work.

The agency has determined that the position is covered by the GS-1087 Editorial Assistance occupation. Applying the titling criteria in the GS-1087 position classification standard (PCS), the agency assigned the title of Editorial Assistant which covers positions at GS-5 level and above. Based on our independent review of the entire appeal record, we concur.

### **Grade determination**

The GS-1087 PCS uses two factors to determine grade level: *Nature of assignments* and *Level of responsibility*.

#### *Nature of assignments*

This factor measures the type and difficulty of assignments. Editorial tasks range from correcting specific errors in basic grammar, spelling, etc., to restructuring sentences, paragraphs and order of paragraphs to assure clarity of expression. Preparation of format tasks range from marking copy to establishing the specifications for a wide variety of publication styles. In verification of factual information, the work ranges from checking dictionaries for syllabification to comparing texts to see that they do not contradict or unnecessarily repeat each other.

The appellant states that her PD understates the complexity of her duties; i.e., the information with which she deals. The complexity of the subject matter of a manuscript, however, is not a classification factor for the occupation. Editorial assistance work does not require full understanding of the substance of the subject matter, but editorial assistants should be familiar with related technical terminology or jargon. Editorial assistants must understand the use of English grammar and grammatical structure. Using this knowledge, they correct grammatical errors, restructure portions of manuscripts, and detect apparent discrepancies and duplications.

GS-7 editorial assistants edit manuscripts by reorganizing them entirely or reorganizing sections of long manuscripts. They reorder paragraphs and suggest changes in the organization of

sections in addition to restructuring sentences and paragraphs. Typical assignments at this level include editing the style of writing to conform to an agency's specified preferences. While editorial assistants don't rewrite the manuscript to appeal to the potential audience, they inform the originating writer or office of established stylistic requirements. They edit manuscripts to assure clarity of expression through grammatical construction.

The appellant's work meets, but does not exceed, the GS-7 grade level, the highest level described for this factor. Typical of that level, she edits lengthy soil survey manuscripts for project leaders within the region. This requires the appellant to reorganize, condense, and format text and tables for the most logical and effective presentation. The appellant ensures that narrative; data, and pictorial components are presented in the correct format and are appropriately coordinated within the overall product to conform to the agency's specified preferences, which is typical of GS-7 editorial assistant assignments. The appellant works with the Soil Data Quality Specialists in her office to ensure that issues of a more technical nature are fully addressed with the project leader(s). Therefore, this factor is credited at the GS-7 grade level.

#### *Level of responsibility*

This factor measures the nature of the use of guidelines and the degree of supervision received. The use of guidelines ranges from checking general dictionaries to preparing procedural manuals. The supervision received varies from a detailed review to general acceptance of an assistant's advice by authors, editors, or others.

GS-7 assistants receive little supervision. They submit edited manuscripts to originating offices for concurrence of authors, editors, or others. These reviews assure that the assistants have not altered the meaning of the manuscript. After assistants prepare specifications for new publications, the planning staff typically reviews them to assure that the specifications conform to the original intent. At the GS-7 grade level, assistants advise others on manuscript preparation.

The appellant's work meets, but does not exceed, the GS-7 grade level, the highest level described for this factor. As at that level, the appellant works under the general supervision of the State Soil Scientist. She performs day-to-day work independently, extracting soil survey material from the agency database, editing and assembling manuscripts. The appellant uses initiative and judgment in completing the work following accepted practices and agency policies. Although she does not submit manuscripts to a planning staff for review, she coordinates efforts with the Soil Data Quality Specialists who are responsible for the technical quality of soil survey data entered into databases by the project leaders. Technical data including soil identification, soil interpretation, soil investigations, and map compilation are randomly checked by the Soil Data Quality Specialists. These specialists are officially assigned responsibility for the quality assurance check of the soil survey database, soil survey maps, map compilation, and final soil survey manuscripts for publication. The appellant provides assistance to project leaders by telephone on agency stylistic procedures and practices and gives training to them as the budget allows. Training covers topics such as manuscript timelines for completion, i.e., sequence of sections to be completed first; citing references correctly; and features of photographs that are effectively reproduced for manuscripts. Soil Data Quality Specialists participate in training

sessions, covering topics that are more technical in nature. Therefore, this factor is credited at the grade 7 level.

*Summary*

Both Nature of assignments and Level of responsibility are properly credited at the GS-7 grade level.

**Decision**

The position is classified properly as Editorial Assistant, GS-1087-7.