

The Historical and Contemporary Role
of Checklists and the Relationship of Checkboxes
to Written Narratives in Home Inspection Reports

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Introduction

The word "Checklist" is one of the home inspection industry's most emotionally charged words. The word arouses ire in inspectors and real estate agents alike. In the minds of many inspectors and others, "Checklist" connotes lack of substance, lack of clarity, lack of completeness and inspector laziness. The battle against the checklist" is fought with words like "incomplete", "cluttered", and "meaningless".

In large measure, the Checklist debate is very much like the stories we heard in the 1960s and 1970s of a World War Two soldier found on some island or in a cave somewhere who, unaware that the war was over, is prepared to do battle with his rescuers.

The great divide between the checklist advocates and those opposed to checklists has been closing because the checklist as we use it in our industry has evolved. Upon closer examination and analysis, we begin to see that we are not so far apart as we may have thought we were. The strongest arguments against checklists are based on report styles that are almost obsolete.

There are still those who stand by the old style reports that were popular in the days when hand-written paper reports dominated but the defenders of those reports are an anachronism. They represent a very small minority who steadfastly hold on to the past. Those whose battle cry is "The Checklist is dead" are really referring to the old style Checklist, not the contemporary home inspection report.

I want to be very clear about one thing. There is no need to take sides. The use of checklists and written narratives is not an either-or debate. Some will assume that because I am defending checklists, I am opposed to written narratives. That would be a completely erroneous assumption. This article is not an indictment of, nor am I opposed to, written narratives. To the contrary, I intend to demonstrate how the judicious use of well-written narratives and properly designed checklists both serve essential roles in contemporary inspection reports.

I am fully in favor of meaningful narratives. However, I do oppose fluff, filler, disclaimers and condescending comments. We should endeavor to be clear and concise. We should be respectful and mindful of the client's needs. Readers of our reports should not have to wade through drivel and inconsequential minutia to find the truly relevant and beneficial information contained in our reports.

Inspectors need to resist the temptation to fill reports with excessive and unwarranted disclaimers that serve no useful purpose. Put your disclaimers in your preinspection agreement and be done with them. Don't subject your client to an endless bombardment of "I'm not responsible, get someone else to look at it" comments.

You are in the business of selling peace of mind. If you lack confidence in yourself and self-respect, how can you expect your clients to have confidence in you or respect you? Use written narratives that project confidence. It is just good business.

An Inquiry

An inquiry from an inspector who had participated in one of my online classes was the catalyst for this article. Inspector Gaylen Ohman sent an e-mail to me the day following an inspection report writing class. Gaylen asked questions about checkboxes that I hear often from inspectors. I have covered the topic of checklists in various articles I have written and in my book "How to Write a Better Home Inspection Report". I have succeeded in getting inspectors to take a fresh look at checklists, even to get them to see checklists in a completely new light but the rethinking of checklists raises other questions in their minds. Gaylen's questions are typical. Inspectors and others in the real estate industry almost universally agree that the old style checklists were woefully inadequate but they are not always sure of what should or should not be in an inspection report that is a hybrid checklist and written narrative report.

Gaylen Ohman wrote:

Greetings George,

Thanks for all your time and efforts in providing us with your much respected views regarding home inspection report writing. The Skype presentation was a great follow-up to your report writing book I read a few weeks ago. I look forward to your future report writing presentations.

I have been using a total narrative type of report for the last three years and am in the process of streamlining my report taking into consideration many of your suggestions.

I am entertaining the thought of adding some check boxes to accompany my new streamlined narratives in hopes of making my report more reader friendly.

My problem is that I have been struggling with what check box names would be most meaningful to the reader (client & Realtor). I would like to limit it to no more than four check boxes. Some check box names that come to mind:

- Serviceable
- Satisfactory
- Inspected
- Not inspected
- Repair
- Deficiency
- Safety
- Not present

Checklist or Written Narrative?

Purely narrative style reports can cause serious problems so I am relieved when an inspector tells me, as Gaylen did, that he no longer intends to do purely narrative reports. Checklists are indispensable tools in virtually every industry. Checklists help to ensure consistency and completeness of complex procedures or sets of related tasks. The widespread use of checklists in aviation, manufacturing, military, architecture, construction, engineering, medicine, accounting and law is testament to their usefulness. Obtaining an ISO (or QS in the automotive industry) certification is becoming mandatory in many industries. It is not possible to obtain ISO or QS ratings without the use of checklists.

Common fallacies in the home inspection industry are that checklists somehow preclude or replace written narratives or that checklists and written narratives are mutually exclusive of one another. Checklists and written narratives both serve legitimate, valuable, even necessary, functions in home inspection reports. The checklist serves to define the procedure and ensure consistency and completeness of the tasks while the written narratives provide indispensable relevant details.

Consultants who lack self-confidence or confidence in the service that they are providing will create bulky reports that lack substance in an

apparent attempt to justify being paid for the job they have done.

Experienced business owners, executives, business managers often scorn those consultants. Not only does the consultant fail to convince the experienced businessperson of the bloated report's usefulness or value, the consultant can, and often does, become an object of contempt.

The goal of any consultant's report should be to convey information clearly, concisely, accurately and efficiently. The checklist will help to achieve that goal. A simple checkmark next to an item that has been inspected clearly conveys to the client that the item was inspected. There is no need for words. The client will know and understand that the item was inspected. Not having a checkmark indicating that an item was inspected requires the inspector to explicitly state in the written narrative that the item was inspected. A common - and very dangerous - practice is to give no indication whatsoever in instances where the item was inspected but there were no problems to report. The inspector's failure to identify every item that he inspected leaves the reader not knowing whether he inspected the item or he did not.

So far, Texas is the only state in the United States that requires a checklist. Texas inspectors are required put a checkmark in every category of the report. The Texas Real Estate commission does not permit inspectors to omit any category from the report unless the

category is specifically designated as being optional. If every inspector in North America were to seek ISO 9000 certification, there can be little doubt that Texas inspectors would achieve the rating in greater numbers than anywhere else in North America would.

When I speak of efficiency with respect to inspection reports, I am not speaking only of you as an inspector making the best use of your report writing time. I am also referring to the finished report. The report needs to communicate your findings efficiently. People have busy lives. They have neither the time nor the desire to read more than it is necessary to read in order to learn what they want and need to know about the house they are buying.

Homebuyers will not be impressed with bulked up inefficient reports. They will appreciate and respect an inspector who has self-confidence and the ability to deliver a comprehensive report that is concise and efficient.

Checklist Stigmata

The stigmata attached to checklists come from the perceptions by some that checklists are the work of a lazy inspector or that checklists are cluttered, difficult to read and provide little, if any, useful information. Home inspection checklists that were popular only five years ago are almost obsolete today. Those old style checklists are artifacts that belong to another time. They were in fact cluttered, difficult to read and often provided little, if any, useful information.

Real estate agents often complain about checklist reports. If you were to present one of those malcontented real estate agents with a properly completed contemporary home inspection report such as the Texas TREC REI 7A-1 report, the response would likely be something along the lines of "Oh, well, that's OK. That's not a checklist report". That person would be wrong. It is a checklist report but it does not fit their perception of what a checklist report is. Contemporary checklists are not the cluttered checklists of the past. They are clean and efficient. They also have space for written narratives in every section and space for photos.

Checkboxes of an Earlier Era

Inspections reports of the past usually had a set of complementary checkboxes. One set of checkboxes had the nomenclature or item identifier (checkboxes naming a physical item or an item's physical attribute). For example, the electrical section of the report typically would have a series of checkboxes listing a variety of types of overcurrent protective devices such as fuses and breakers. A sub-set of checkboxes would list a variety of device amperage ratings such as 60A, 100A, 125A, 150A, 200A, etc. The inspector would place checkmarks in the appropriate boxes.

A set of qualifier checkboxes would complement nomenclature checkboxes. A qualifier is a brief qualitative description, usually condition, of the item such as "Good", "Marginal", "Poor" or "Unsatisfactory".

Home inspectors, homebuyers, and real estate agents alike, considered the old one or two word descriptions of condition to be ambiguous and woefully inadequate. Words such as "Good", "Fair" and "Poor" do not always mean the same things to all people. A frustrated real estate agent might ask, "What does '**Fair**' mean? Is it **OK** or **isn't it?**" In the inspector's mind "Fair" may have been a reasonable description of the condition but in the real estate agent's opinion it should have been checked as being "Good" if it was not

broken. The words were too vague. They were too much subject to different interpretation by different readers.

The checkboxes also took up too much space on the page, making it hard to read and providing little useful information. Most of the checkboxes on the page were not relevant to the house being inspected. The checkboxes, especially the qualitative checkboxes were the cause of much of the disdain of checklists that persists to this day.

Home inspection reports of the past were not so much reports on the condition of a house as they were a description of home's attributes. However, it would be both unfair and inaccurate to imply that the reports had no value at all.

The true value of a home inspection is not the report that results from the inspection. The true value of a home inspection is the homebuyer's peace of mind that comes from knowing that a skilled professional has inspected the house. It would be wrong to assume that the inspection reports of the past were of no value because they at least provided a list of the items that the inspector had inspected.

Checkboxes in Contemporary Reports

The recent trend has been not to use either nomenclature or qualitative checkboxes. They have given way to checkboxes that neither name nor qualify an item. Instead, the checkboxes in common use today identify whether or not an item has or has not been inspected, not present, is deficient, defective, or needs repair.

The item nomenclature is typically along side the set of checkboxes. Modern inspection report writing software makes the nomenclature checkboxes unnecessary. Nomenclatures checkboxes have given way to nomenclature fields or section titles that name the item. With inspection report software, the inspector can change nomenclature fields quickly and easily. Each field typically contains a variety of nomenclatures that the inspector can access and choose by way of drop down menus of choices.

The qualitative assessment has been moved from a checkbox to the written narrative section where there is opportunity to provide a more complete description of condition.

Lets' say that an inspector is looking at a wood deck that is in need of maintenance. Specifically, it needs a coat of stain or paint to protect the wood. The wood is in good condition. There is no warping or evidence of deterioration. However, the inspector recognizes that if

the deck does not get a new coat of stain soon, it will begin to deteriorate. In the inspector's mind, the appropriate checkbox would have been "fair". The real estate agent later looks at the report and calls the inspector in anger asking why he only qualified the deck as being "Fair". After all, "the wood is not warped or damaged, there are no missing pieces", etc. Then the inspector gets a call from the home buyer "why did you say the deck is 'Fair' when it clearly needs a new coat of stain. Did you even look at the deck? How could you have missed this?" At about this point the inspector is thinking "Oh, my aching head ...".

A contemporary report will likely have a checkbox indicating a need for repair. The inspector would check the "Needs repair" or "Deficiency" box and would likely include a statement such as "*The wood deck is in good condition but is in need of a coat of wood stain. The deck will deteriorate at an accelerating rate if the wood is left unprotected. A new coat of wood stain will preserve the condition of the wood.*" The inspector could also include a photograph of the deck annotated with a paintbrush icon to indicate the need for maintenance.

It is plain to see how this newer way of reporting is much more meaningful than the old way. There is less likelihood of confusion. The inspector has made an observation, alerted the report's reader to the fact that the deck needs maintenance or repair. The inspector has clearly and concisely described both the condition of the deck and the

consequences of not performing the needed maintenance or the making the needed repair.

The inspector's written narrative in this instance is a perfect example of a well written narrative. To add anything more to the narrative would serve no beneficial purpose. To the contrary, expanding on the narrative would lessen its efficiency and would likely weaken it, reducing its effectiveness.

It is at this point where an inspector may add comments that not only weaken the report but also make the inspector himself look weak and lacking self-confidence. Comments such as "further evaluation by a structural engineer is recommended" or "the deck should be painted or stained by a qualified painter" diminish the clarity, effectiveness and efficiency of the report.

At best, the additional comments are filler that serve no useful purpose. At worst, they weaken the report, make the inspector look weak, and could offend the reader. Telling the reader to have a "qualified person" do something is tantamount to saying, "you are not intelligent enough to know that you should have a qualified person do the work so I need to tell you what to do".

The Checkbox Titles

Inspected, Not Inspected, Not Present,

Repair, Defective and Deficiency

As mentioned earlier, all Texas home inspection reports have the same set of checkboxes. That same set of checkboxes is fast becoming the de facto minimum standard in the entire home inspection industry. The four Texas checkboxes are "Inspected", "Not Inspected", "Not Present" and "Deficiency".

Inspected, not inspected, and not present were not common on the old paper reports. The array of nomenclature checkboxes served the same purpose that inspected, not inspected, and not present serve in a modern report. A check next to an item in the old reports would indicate that the item had been present and that it had been inspected. The inspector would indicate the condition of the item using the "Condition" (qualitative) checkboxes.

Reports were cluttered because they contained dozens of nomenclature checkboxes that did not apply to the house being inspected. The inspector would check only the relevant checkboxes. The reports were difficult to read, frequently lead to confusion, and conveyed little useful information.

Some contemporary reports will rely on "Inspected" to indicate that an item was both present and inspected. In the absence of a "Not Inspected" checkbox the absence of a checkmark in the "Inspected" checkbox indicates that the item is not present. However, it is more common in modern reports to have checkboxes that explicitly state that an item has not been inspected or is not present.

A practice that persists in the industry, albeit among a relatively small number of inspectors, is to omit completely an item if it is not present in the home being inspected. The "Not Inspected" and "Not Present" checkboxes obviously are not needed if the item is not in the report. Omitting items from your standard report is a bad practice. It could lead to confusion and customer dissatisfaction. I will not cover this topic in detail here because I have covered it elsewhere in "[How to Write a Better Home Inspection Report](#)" and in the article "[Mike's Dilemma - the Importance of Consistency in Inspection Report Writing](#)".

"Defective" is still more common than "Deficiency" but deficiency is the better choice. Something that is deficient is inadequate. It is lacking some essential element or quality. A defect is also a deficiency but the word defect implies that the item is flawed, faulty, or broken. An item can be deficient without necessarily being defective. In logical terms, defects are a subset of deficiencies. In other words, defective items are always deficient but deficient items are not always defective. In

the example of the wood deck in the previous section, it would be appropriate to say that the deck was deficient, or has a deficiency. It would be neither appropriate nor accurate to describe the deck as being defective.

Texas had previously used the word "Repair" instead of "Deficiency". Repair implies that item was once in working order and needs to be restored to working order. A defective item may never have been in working order therefore you cannot restore it to working order.

An item that is in need of repair is also deficient because it lacks some essential element or quality. The quality that it lacks may or may not be operability. A deficient item may be in working order but may require service or maintenance. It could also be a maintenance related deficiency that will render the item inoperable or cause damage if maintenance is not performed as in the case of our wood deck.

The Texas Real Estate Commission's decision to change "Repair" to "Deficiency" (effective 01 February 2009) was a major improvement in the TREC report. "Deficiency" clearly and accurately describes a wider range of situations than either "Defect" or "Repair" by themselves. The inspector can use the written narrative section to provide relevant details.

I am not suggesting that because Texas is using not using "Defect" or "Repair" that you should stop using them. Outright replacing "Defect" with "Deficiency" likely will make your reports clearer but removing "Repair" will not. The use of "Repair" in addition to "Deficiency" will serve to make clear that the deficient item needs repair. Using "Deficiency" alone may cause some readers to fail to understand that there is need for repair.

OK, Safety and Hazard

"OK", "Safety" and "Hazard" are like "Repair" in that they too can make your meaning clearer in your reports. There is a trade-off though. Increasing the number of checkboxes can make a report more difficult to read. The goal is to make the report as easy to read and to understand as possible while also communicating important information. We need to have a balance between the number of checkboxes and the information that the checkboxes convey.

"OK" is not common because it is not necessary. Readers will understand that an item is OK where a checkmark indicates that the inspector inspected the item but there are no accompanying comments. The number of items that are OK in a typical inspection will greatly outnumber the items with deficiencies. Every item in the

report will have at least two checkmarks. The larger number of checkmarks will also make the report more difficult to read.

The checkmarks will do little to make the inspector's meaning clearer while adding additional steps to writing the report thus reducing efficiency. OK, Safety and Hazard potentially can make the inspector's meaning clearer but they can also make the report look cluttered thus making it more difficult to read. Any way you look at it, their use does not have a favorable cost to benefit ratio.

Qualitative Checkbox Titles to Avoid

Serviceable

“Serviceable” tops the list of descriptors to avoid. One of the more disturbing trends in home inspection reports has been the use of the nebulous “Serviceable” for qualitative checkboxes. The word serviceable leads to confusion because of its many unrelated meanings. Serviceable can mean that an item is capable of being serviced, that it is ready for service, that it is repairable or that it is in working order. Serviceable can also mean that the item is effective, useful, beneficial, of limited usefulness, suitable but not ideal, and so on. Different people will read the word serviceable and have different ideas of what it means. Serviceable is a word that should only be used in a complete sentence and in a context which makes the writers use of the word clear. You should never use the word serviceable as a single word description for anything. To do so is to invite trouble.

Good, Satisfactory, Marginal, Poor or Unsatisfactory

These words all have one thing in common. They are all ambiguous because of their subjective nature. Like “Serviceable”, different people will interpret each of these words differently. I used these words in my early years as a home inspector because they were the descriptors

that were common in use at the time. Real estate agents and home sellers occasionally would challenge my opinion. A real estate agent might call, for example, to ask me what was wrong with something I had checked as being "Satisfactory". When I would say that there was nothing wrong with the item the agent would proceed to ask "*Then why did you mark it as satisfactory? You ought to have marked it as being GOOD*".

We are consultants. Clients hire us for our opinions. We should not have to defend our choice of words but like it or not, sometimes we do have to defend our choice of words. The use of words that have clearer boundaries or thresholds are easier to defend. Not only that, they are easier for the reader to understand.

In our example of the wood deck, we can say that the wood is good condition because we observed no damage of any kind. It is easy in this instance to define what we mean by "Good". Further, it is more likely that we could get a consensus of the definition of "Good" among several people where there is no damage to the wood. On the other hand, you might have dissenting opinions if you were to describe the deck as good. In your mind, needing a coat of stain may not mean that the deck is not good but in someone else's way of thinking, needing a coat of stain means that the deck is not good. They may have the opinion that is fair, marginal, or unsatisfactory. Checking the "Inspected", and "Repair" checkboxes along with a brief comment that

the wood is in good condition but that the deck needs a coat of stain avoids confusion about the meanings of words such as “Good” or “Fair”. The client will know that the wood is in good condition but the deck needs a coat of stain.

How Many Checkboxes?

The number of checkboxes you use in your reports is almost as important as the checkbox titles. What is the right number? Is there a right number? Only you can answer those questions. You are ultimately responsible for everything that is or is not in your report. If adding or removing a checkbox leaves you with an uneasy feeling, then perhaps you shouldn't do it.

You may think one thing but then feel differently once you see the checkboxes in an actual report or on paper. Let's take a look at some possibilities. Figure 1 below is a screen shot of the Texas TREC REI 7A-1 format from XL Pro Titanium Edition.

I	NI	NP	D	Inspection Item
				I. STRUCTURAL SYSTEMS
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	A. Foundations
<i>Type of Foundation(s)</i>				
<i>Comments:</i>				

Figure 1 – TREC REI 7A-1 format

Figure 2 has the checkboxes that are in Figure 1 but with the addition of a "Repair" checkbox. A report with four or five checkbox columns is easy to read and efficient.






 I	 NI	 NP	 R	 D	Item Comments
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Foundation walls

Figure 2 – "Repair" added

Figure 3 adds "OK" to the checkboxes bringing the column count to six. The report will still be relatively easy to read provided there is sufficient vertical and horizontal spacing between the checkboxes. The closer together the checkboxes are, the more difficult it will be to read the report.







 I	 NI	 NP	 OK	 R	 D	Item Comment
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Foundation walls

Figure 3 – "OK" added

Figure 4 adds "Serviceable" to the checkboxes. We are now up to seven columns. With seven columns, a long series of rows with seven columns will require the inspector to be very careful not to inadvertently place a check in the wrong column. Headings usually

appear above column, not every checkbox. Reading the report will be increasingly difficult going down the page.

I	NI	NP	OK	Sv	R	D	Item
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Comment
<input type="checkbox"/>							Fondation walls

Figure 4 – “Serviceable” added

Figure 5 adds “Safety” to the checklist collection. At eight columns, the report will be very difficult to read. Readers will likely become fatigued and annoyed trying to match each checkmark to its heading as they progress down the page.

I	NI	NP	OK	S	Sv	R	D	Item
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Comment
<input type="checkbox"/>								Fondation walls

Figure 5 – “Safety” added

Once we exceed six columns, we have gone back to the less effective and less efficient reports of the past. The layout may be different from those old reports but the report is relying on the checkboxes to tell the story. That is what the old reports did. The written narrative sections do not disappear completely with the additional columns but the columns consume space that could have been used for written narratives.

A report with four, five, or six checklist columns will achieve a reasonable balance between the checkboxes and written narratives. There is benefit of each checkbox diminished with the addition of each successive checkbox. The inspector needs to decide what is best for his style of reporting.

The Checkmark

The Checkmark may not be something that you think about often but if you like everything else, inspectors have their opinions and preferences. Basic check marks and "X"s are sufficient. A simple but powerful enhancement you can make to your reports is to use a check mark to indentify a positive or neutral finding and an X to indicate a deficiency. Adding color also enhances the report's readability and effectiveness. You could use a red X, for example, to identify something that needs attention or repair.

Standard symbols and icons can greatly enhance the inspection report. Real estate agents complain that home inspectors are alarmists. They accuse inspectors of making things look to be worse than they really are. Checkmarks and Xs appear to assign the same importance to everything in the report. The details and any differentiation will be in the written narrative sections.

Like a newspaper headline, symbols provide an introduction and set a tone for the story that follows. Placing the information symbol in a checkbox is much more disarming than either a checkmark or an X. Similarly, other symbols can provide visual cues of what is to come.

Common Symbols



Information



Attention



Danger



No

Basic symbols are available, usually in fixed locations, are common in inspection report software from a few inspection report software publishers. However, the concept of a symbols and icons library coupled with an insertion tool has been a copyrighted feature of **BestInspectors.Net** software since 2004. Therefore, this feature is only available in **BestInspectors.Net** brand home and commercial inspection report software.

Conclusion

Inspection reports are no different from cars, clothes, music or anything else. What was popular and worked well a few years ago is outmoded today. Inspection reports will continue to change as our industry and our world changes. We may have tools and technique a few years from now that no one has yet to conceive.

What is not likely to change is the basic goal of the inspection report. The goal is the same today as it was ten, twenty or fifty years ago. The goal is to describe the condition of the house to the client as effectively, as accurately, and as efficiently as we are able to do.

Home inspection, like every business, is competitive. The successful home inspector is the one who is constantly looking for ways to improve, watching for emerging trends and finding ways to influence local trends. The inspector who always follows what every other inspector is doing will always be at a competitive disadvantage. It is not enough to write reports the way every other inspector in area writes reports. Your reports have to be better than theirs are.

Standards will change over time to meet changing needs. The role of the inspector in the future may be different from what it is today. As the home inspection industry grows, other occupations will attempt to protect what they believe to be their territory. Trade associations and

private lobbyists will try to persuade Governments make new rules to more clearly define the role of the home inspector or enforce existing rules to ensure that inspectors do not cross imaginary lines.

Trends, laws, competition, protectionism and a myriad of things we not even aware of - all of these things have influenced and will continue to influence the way we write our reports.

One thing that has not changed in a thousand years and is not likely to change anytime soon is the usefulness of checklists. At any given time in any given occupation, checklists may have a lesser or a greater role but they never become obsolete. They never become useless. A checklist will help you to ensure that you are consistent in the way you do your inspections. They will help to ensure that you do not miss anything. The most important benefit of the checklist is that it shows your client what you inspected and what you did not inspect.

Most modern inspection report software provides the inspector ample opportunity to include written descriptions where needed. Judicious use of written narratives combined with a logical and comprehensive checklist will result in an inspection report that meets its objectives of effectiveness, accuracy, and efficiency.