

CHAPTER

3

Writing Effective Reports



Can You Define?

active voice
 chronological order
 concise
 conclusionary language
 connotative
 content
 denotative
 fact
 first person
 form
 inference
 mechanics
 narrative
 objective
 opinion
 past tense
 slanting

Do You Know?

- Why reports are important to an investigation?
- How reports are used?
- Who reads your reports?
- What common problems occur in many police reports?
- Which is more important: content or form?
- What the characteristics of effective investigative reports are?
- How to differentiate among facts, inferences, and opinions?
- Why your reports should be well written?

Outline

The Importance of Reports
 Uses of Reports
 The Audience
 Common Problems with Many Police Reports
 The Well-Written Report: From Start to Finish
 Taping and Dictating Reports
 Computerized Report Writing
 Evaluating Your Report
 Citizen Online Report Writing
 The Final Report
 A Final Note on the Importance of Well-Written Reports

One of the most important skills investigators must develop is report writing. The remainder of this volume discusses in detail how evidence is located and processed; how witnesses, victims, suspects, and others are questioned; and how specific cases are investigated. Report writing is included here because the report captures the essentials of an investigation.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the importance of investigative

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reports. This is followed by a look at how reports are used, the various audiences of investigative reports, how a well-written report is created from start to finish, and some common problems with many police reports. Next the differences between content and form are reviewed, followed by a brief description of organizing and structuring the narrative portion of the

report and a description of the characteristics of effective reports. Then taping and dictating reports and computerized report writing (Figure 3.1) are discussed, as well as evaluating reports. The chapter concludes with a discussion of a new trend, online reporting by citizens, and a final look at why reports are so important.

The Importance of Reports



Orlando W. Wilson and Roy C. McLaren wrote in *Police Administration* nearly 30 years ago:

Almost everything that a police officer does must be reduced to writing. What is written is often the determining factor in whether a suspect is arrested in the first place and, if he is arrested, whether he is convicted and sentenced. The contents of written reports, in fact, often have great bearing in life-and-death situations. To say that officers need to be proficient in report writing is an understatement.

Nelson (p.226) notes: "Paperwork has never been fun. It is the drudgery of law enforcement. However, . . . what officers do not often recognize is that their reports are part of the arsenal with which they put criminals behind bars. A well-crafted report is as important as the investigation, for without the former the latter is meaningless." According to Scoville (p.37): "Faced with a

well-documented police report, defendants are more apt to cop a plea than go to trial, in hope of a more lenient sentence. Indeed, it's not unfair to say that plea bargaining is often a trial by police report."

Calling the task of writing reports "unglamorous but critically important," Dees (p.18) observes: "Of all the ills that complicate the lives of police recruits and the people who train them, report writing has long been at the top of the list." The importance of well-written reports becomes obvious when you realize that your reports are *used*, not simply filed away. If investigative reports were not required for efficient law enforcement, you would not have to write them.



Reports are permanent written records of important facts of a case to be used in the future. They are a crucial and necessary cog in the wheel of justice.

Miller (p.6) points out: "The fact that police reports help make the criminal justice system function correctly should be reason enough to devote the time and energy necessary to write a good report." Miller (p.7) also



Figure 3.1

Laptop computers in squad cars make writing reports much more efficient. In addition, the reports can be sent via wireless connection directly to headquarters without delay.

points out: “Good investigations and well-written reports have a positive and beneficial effect on the victims of crime and on the private citizens who will later appear as witnesses in court.”

Well-written reports not only further the cause of justice, but also reflect positively on your education, your competence, and your professionalism. Indeed, as Sievert (p.35) contends: “Good or bad, the language, style and tone of our investigative reports [tell] the reader about the writer. . . . Juries and even District Attorneys equate sloppy police writing with sloppy thinking and careless investigative methods.” Figure 3.2 shows the typical path of an investigative report. The number of times the report loops between the supervisor and the officer, or between the prosecutor and the officer, depends on how carefully (or carelessly) the officer constructs the report to begin with.

Most law enforcement officers submit their reports for prosecution with concern over the outcome but without much thought about the wheels they’ve started in motion. This is understandable, for they’ve done their jobs, and many more cases wait to be investigated. But what happens when they haven’t really done their jobs? when their reports are distorted or incomplete (as many are) because of poor writing? The results not only cost the taxpayers in wasted personnel-hours, but they also breed disaster in the courtroom, if the case even makes it that far. For example, a study conducted for the City of San Francisco found that poor police report writing was jeopardizing effective criminal prosecution, with less than 4 percent of all felony arrest cases each year making it to prosecution (Sievert, p.35).

The little things in a report can have major consequences for the disposition of a case. Consider this all-too-common example: In one criminal case the reporting officer, using the passive voice, wrote, “The weapon was found in the bushes where the suspect had thrown it.” He did not clarify this statement elsewhere in his report. Expectedly, the prosecuting attorney subpoenaed the reporting officer to testify at the preliminary hearing. Unfortunately, the reporting officer’s testimony revealed that his partner, not he, had observed the suspect’s action and had retrieved the weapon. The partner was unavailable to testify on short notice. Without her testimony, the necessary elements of the crime could not be established and the case was dismissed, having to be refiled. The personnel-hours expended at the time of the dismissal, by witnesses, secretaries, clerks, attorneys, and the judge, were virtually wasted because the whole process had to be repeated. The reporting officer could have avoided the problem at the onset through use of the active voice, which would have provided clarification. Sadly, this basic writing error is not an isolated example; it, and others like it, slip through the system daily, causing delays in the judicial process and depleting dwindling budgets.

To better understand how to write effective reports, consider first how they may be used.

Uses of Reports



Reports are permanent records of all important facts in a case. They are a stockpile of information to be drawn upon by all individuals on a law enforcement team. They are an aid to individual law enforcement officers and investigators, supervisors, administrators, the courts, other governmental agencies, reporters, and private individuals. Further, the efficiency of a department is directly related to the quality of its reports and reporting procedures.

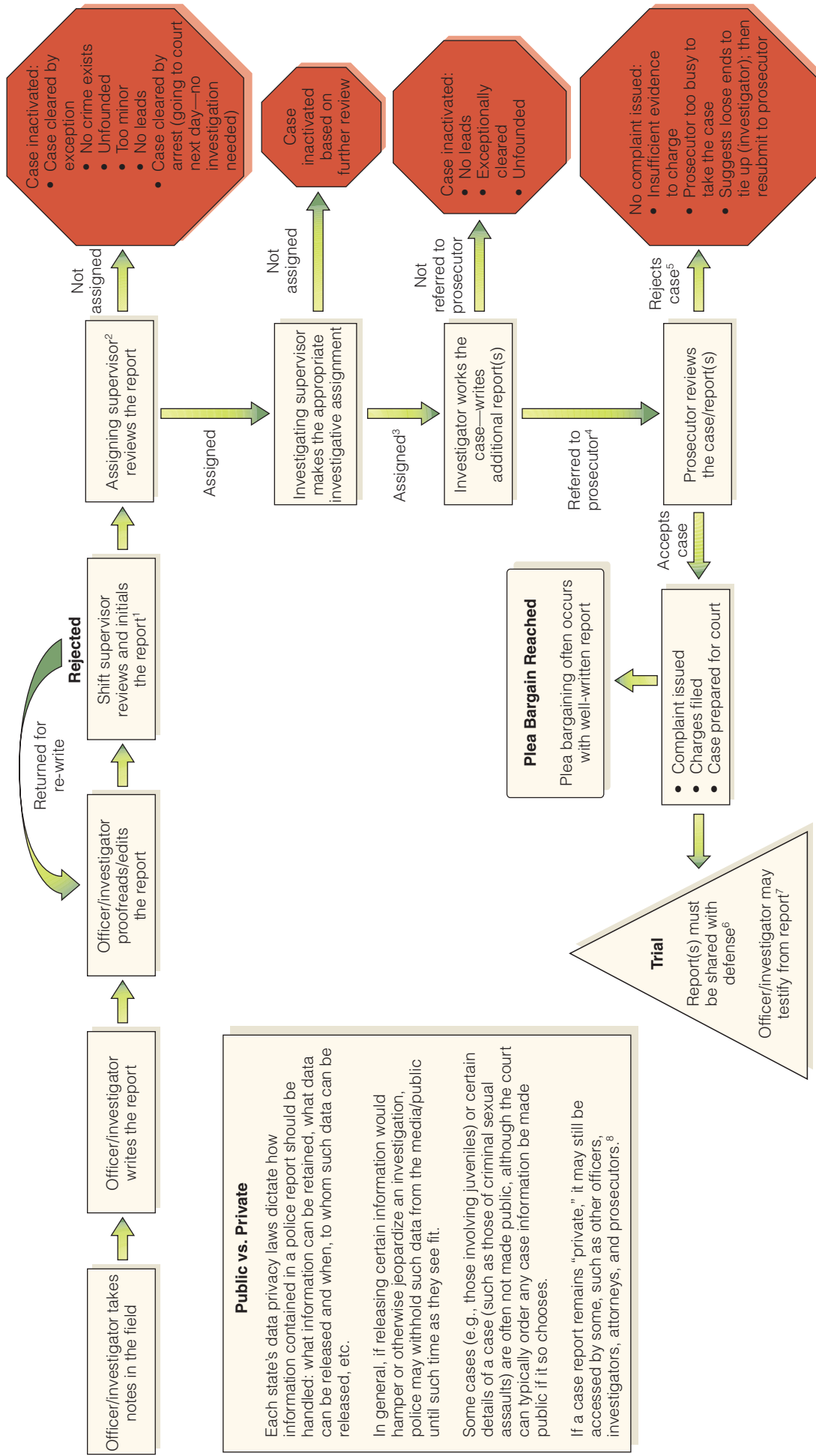
Consider the case of an officer called to the scene of a hit-and-run. The initial accident report would be used to continue the investigation of the offense. If the offender were apprehended, the report would be used by the prosecuting attorneys in preparing the case, by the responding police officer when testifying in court, by the judge in determining the facts of the case, and by the jury if a trial resulted. The report might also be used by the department in determining where dangerous intersections exist and in making future plans. Additionally, an officer’s supervisor could use the report to evaluate the performance of the investigating officer. If the officer failed to conduct a thorough investigation, this lack of thoroughness would show in the report.



Reports are used to:

- Examine the past.
- Keep other police officers informed.
- Continue investigations.
- Prepare court cases.
- Provide the courts with relevant facts.
- Coordinate law enforcement activities.
- Plan for future law enforcement services.
- Evaluate individual officer and department performance.
- Refresh a witness’s memory as to what he or she said occurred.
- Refresh the investigating officer’s memory during the trial.
- Compile statistics on crime in a given jurisdiction.
- Provide information to insurance investigators.

Reports are critical in examining police performance and investigating potentially illegal police practices. For example, Levenson (“State on Hunt”) notes that 247 police departments throughout Massachusetts have been urged to voluntarily augment their traffic stop reports in an effort to shed light on allegations of racial profiling. Although many agencies are embracing the initiative as a way to seize control of their traffic data and build confidence in the fairness of their policing, other departments are opting out of the program,



Public vs. Private

Each state's data privacy laws dictate how information contained in a police report should be handled: what information can be retained, what data can be released and when, to whom such data can be released, etc.

In general, if releasing certain information would hamper or otherwise jeopardize an investigation, police may withhold such data from the media/public until such time as they see fit.

Some cases (e.g., those involving juveniles) or certain details of a case (such as those of criminal sexual assaults) are often not made public, although the court can typically order any case information be made public if it so chooses.

If a case report remains "private," it may still be accessed by some, such as other officers, investigators, attorneys, and prosecutors.⁸

¹ Often the report is simply handwritten by the officer, given to the shift supervisor for a cursory review/initialing, and then sent off for transcription before going to an assigning supervisor.

² Assigning supervisor is typically of higher rank (lieutenant, captain, etc.).

³ In smaller departments, the case may go to a generalized investigator. In larger departments, several investigative units may exist (homicide, arson, motor vehicle theft, etc.).

⁴ Case can proceed to prosecutor with or without an arrest having been made.

⁵ A rejection does not necessarily mean case is not prosecutable at a later date. It means only that a complaint is not issued at that time.

⁶ Who has access to the report(s) at trial varies by state. For example, in Minnesota, the judge and jury do not automatically receive the report(s).

⁷ The report itself is not evidence, but any testimony the officer/investigator provides based on the content of a report becomes part of the trial record (testimonial evidence).

⁸ Check with your state's data privacy law. Laws vary from state to state regarding what can be retained, what must be released, and when information must be released. Consideration must also be given to whether or not release of information would hamper any ongoing investigations.

Figure 3.2 Typical path of an investigative report. Note: Because this process varies from department to department, this flowchart illustrates a generalized oversimplification of one way an investigative report might travel from origination to final disposition.

claiming that the more extensive reports add to their already excessive paperwork load. Some critics of the program believe officers might be dissuaded from making legitimate traffic stops because of the undue amount of paperwork these will generate.

The various uses of reports make obvious the fact that they will be read by many different people for many different reasons. These people make up your audience.

The Audience



What you write may be read by other officers, your supervisor, lawyers, judges, jurors, social workers, city officials, insurance adjusters and investigators, citizens, and reporters—people from different backgrounds and fields who have varying degrees of familiarity with legal terms and police jargon. Certainly the vast majority of your audience will not have been present at the crime scene. Therefore, you must communicate clearly to these numerous readers *what* happened, *when*, and *how*.



Reports are read by:

- Other officers.
- Supervisors.
- Attorneys and judges.
- Jurors.
- City officials.
- Insurance adjusters and investigators.
- Citizens.
- Reporters.

You should neither talk down to your audience nor try to make your report appear “more professional” by using bureaucratic, complicated language. Keep your reports straightforward and reader friendly, focusing on the need to *express* the facts of the case rather than trying to *impress* the audience with your expansive vocabulary. Writing to impress rather than express is a common problem with many investigative reports.

Common Problems with Many Police Reports



Writing effective investigation reports is a skill that must be learned and practiced just as any other skill necessary in police work, such as firearms use, self-defense techniques, and interview methods. Unfortunately, some departments have yet to develop a full appreciation of the benefits of well-written

reports. In these agencies, reports are viewed as tedious time wasters that keep investigators from more significant tasks. Field training officers encourage new recruits to take report shortcuts, while administrators look the other way, happy to avoid the overtime that can occur with thorough, accurate, complex reports. Amid such an environment, effective report writing skills are neither taught nor recognized as important, and problems in the department’s police reports abound.



Among the common problems in police reports are:

- Confusing or unclear sentences.
- Conclusions, assumptions, and opinions.
- Extreme wordiness and overuse of police jargon and abbreviations.
- Missing or incomplete information.
- Misspelled words and grammatical/mechanical errors.
- Referring to “above” information.

Having briefly looked at the “don’ts” of report writing, the discussion now turns to the “do’s” and how to craft a well-written report.

The Well-Written Report: From Start to Finish



Report writing is a skill that takes time and practice to develop. It is *not* a talent—you are not expected to write entertaining literary masterpieces, full of insight and originality. Instead, to write an effective, successful report, you must organize your notes and adhere to some basic standards of written English regarding content and form.

Organizing Information

A cornerstone of good report writing is organization. Good reports do not just happen. The writer plans in advance in what order the information should be written. Too many officers simply sit down and start writing without giving any thought to how the report should flow, which results in more time spent rewriting and revising later. To use your time most efficiently, first make an informal outline. Next, list what you want to include under each heading in the outline. Review your notes and number each statement to match a heading in your outline. For example, if Section III.C of the outline is headed “Description of Suspect #2,” write *III.C* in the margin wherever Suspect #2 is described in your notes. List the facts of the investigation in **chronological order** beginning with the response to the call and concluding with the end of the investigation. If the report is long

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(more than four pages), use headings to guide the reader—for example, “Initial Response,” “Crime-Scene Conditions,” “Photographs Taken,” “Evidence,” “Witnesses,” “Suspects,” and so on. After you complete the outline and determine where each note fits, you are ready to begin writing.

Structuring the Narrative

Usually the **narrative**, the “story” of the case in chronological order, is structured as follows:

1. The opening paragraph of a police report states the time, date, type of incident, and how you became involved.
2. The next paragraph contains what you were told by the victim or witness. For each person talked to, use a separate paragraph.
3. Next record what you did based on the information you received.
4. The final paragraph states the disposition of the case.

Steps 2 and 3 may be repeated several times in a report on a case where you talk to several witnesses/victims.

A Brief Look at Law Enforcement Report Forms While this chapter focuses on writing narrative reports, many departments use box-style law enforcement report forms for certain offenses and incidents. Law enforcement report forms vary greatly in format, and the examples shown in Figure 3.3 are only a few of the types of forms in use.

Hess and Wroblewski (p.iv) state: “Report forms such as those shown [in Figure 3.3] contain boxes or separate category sections, e.g., property loss section, for placement of descriptive information, addresses and phone numbers of the persons involved. It is unnecessary to repeat this information in the narrative *unless it is needed for clarity* because it tends to interrupt the flow of words and clutter the narrative.” In contrast, narrative reports that do *not* use the box-style format include descriptive information, addresses, and phone numbers within the body of the narrative, since no separate section exists for those data.

Read the following excerpt from a narrative report, noting the underlined descriptive information.

I talked to the victim, Betty Jones, 355 Rose St., Albany, New York, phone 555-9002. Jones told me that her diamond ring was taken during the burglary. The ring was a 2-carat diamond stone, platinum setting, with the initials B.A.J. inside the band, valued at \$11,500.00.


If these data were, instead, to be formatted into a box-style report, the underlined descriptive information, address, and phone number would be deleted from the narrative *unless that information was needed for clarity*, as shown in the following excerpt:

The victim, Betty Jones, told me that her diamond ring was taken during the burglary.


Brown and Cox (p.84) note that formerly many agencies used a three-part report: the blanks at the beginning of the report, a synopsis or summary, and the narrative. They contend that many agencies have moved away from the use of synopses recently. However, if your department does use a synopsis format, include the *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*, but not the *why*: “Concentrate on making the synopsis as brief and clear as possible.”

Characteristics of Effective Reports: Content and Form


In addition to a well-structured narrative, an effective report exhibits several other characteristics, which generally fall into one of two areas: **content**, or *what* is said, and **form**, or *how* it is written.

 **The effective report writer attends to both content and form, as they are equally important in a well-written report.**

The *content* of an effective report is factual, accurate, objective, and complete. The *form* of a well-written report is concise, clear, grammatically and mechanically correct, and written in standard English. An effective report is also organized into paragraphs and written in the past tense, using the first person and active voice. Finally, a well-written report is audience focused, legible, and submitted on time. Table 3.1 illustrates the differences between content and form as they relate to investigative reports.

 **An effective report is factual, accurate, objective, complete, concise, clear, grammatically and mechanically correct, written in standard English, organized into paragraphs, written in the past tense, uses the first person and active voice, and is audience focused and legible, leaving the reader with a positive impression of the writer's competence. It is also submitted on time.**

Factual The basic purpose of any investigation report is to record the facts. A **fact** is a statement that can be proven. (It may be proven false, but it is still classified as a factual statement.) The truthfulness or accuracy of facts will be discussed shortly. First consider how to clearly distinguish among three basic types of statements.

 **Fact:** A statement that can be proven.
Example: The man has a bulge in his black leather jacket pocket.

Inference: A conclusion based on reasoning.
Example: The man is probably carrying a gun.

Opinion: A personal belief.
Example: Black leather jackets are cool.

Table 3.1 / Investigative Reports: Content and Form Compared

Content— <i>what</i> is said	Form— <i>how</i> it is said
The elements of the crime	Word choice
Descriptions of suspects, victims, etc.	Sentence and paragraph length
Evidence collected	Spelling
Actions of victim, witnesses, suspects	Punctuation
Observations: weather, road conditions, smells, sounds, oddities, etc.	Grammar
	Mechanics

A well-written report is factual. It does *not* contain opinions. You can discuss and debate facts and inferences logically and reasonably and come to some agreement on them. An **opinion**, however, reflects personal beliefs, on which there is seldom agreement. For example, how do you resolve the differences between two people arguing over whether pie tastes better than cake? You can't. It's simply a matter of personal preference.

Inferences (conclusions) can prove valuable in a report, provided they are based on sufficient evidence. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between facts and inferences. One way to tell them apart is to ask the question "Can the statement be simply proven true or false, or do I need other facts to make it reasonable?" For example, if you wanted to verify the statement "The driver of the truck was drunk," you would need to supply several facts to support your inference. One such fact might be that he had a blood alcohol content over .10. Other facts might include your observations, such as his slurred speech, his red and watery eyes, five empty beer cans behind the driver's seat, and the strong odor of an alcoholic beverage on the driver's breath.

An **inference** is not really true or false; it is sound or unsound (believable or not believable). And the only way to make an inference sound (believable) is to provide facts to support it. One way to ensure that your inference is clearly an inference, instead of a fact, would be to use the word *apparently* or *appeared* (e.g., "The driver appeared to be under the influence of alcohol").

Inferences are also referred to as **conclusionary language**. Avoid conclusionary language by *showing*, not *telling*. For example, do not write, "The man *could not* walk a straight line." You do not know what another person can or cannot do. A more factual way to report this would be "The man *did* not walk a straight line." Even better would be, "The man stepped 18 inches to the right of the line twice and 12 inches to the left of the line three times." Consider this account by Rutledge (pp.110-111):

I once got into a drunk driving trial where, according to the arresting officer, the defendant had "repeatedly refused" to take a chemical test. The defendant was named Sanchez, and at trial he insisted, through a court interpreter, that he neither spoke nor understood any

English. His defense that he couldn't possibly refuse an English-language request when he couldn't even understand it sold well with the jury, especially after the officer had to admit that he didn't recall exactly how or in what specific words the defendant had "refused" a test. The cop couldn't live with his conclusionary report. Neither could I. The defendant lived with it very comfortably, and he owed his acquittal directly to the same officer who had arrested him. Ironic?

We would have been much better off if the cop had never used the conclusionary word "refused," but had instead married the defendant to his own words! The report could have helped the prosecution, instead of the defense, if it had been written like this:

After I explained the need to take a chemical test, Sanchez said, in Spanish-accented English, "Screw you, cop. . . . I ain't taking no test, man. Why don't you take it yourself?" I told him he had to take a test or his license would be suspended. He said, "I don't need no license to drive, man. I know lots of people drive without a license. You ain't scared me, man, and I ain't taking no stupid test. I'll beat this thing."

See the difference? Not a single conclusion or interpretation. The reader gets to "hear" the same things the writer heard. The officer could have lived with something like that—the defendant couldn't.

The following conclusionary statements can also jeopardize the effectiveness and value of investigative reports:


- "They denied any involvement in the crime."
- "She confessed to seven more arsons."
- "He admitted breaking into the warehouse."
- "He consented to a search of the trunk."
- "She waived her rights per Miranda."

Table 3.2 presents alternatives to conclusionary words and phrases that will make reports more factual and, thus, more effective and valuable.

Conclusionary language may also lead to inaccuracies in your report.

Accurate To be useful, facts must be accurate. An effective report accurately records the correct time and date, correct names of all persons involved, correct phone numbers and addresses, and exact descriptions of the crime scene, property, vehicles, and suspects involved.

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<h2 style="margin: 0;">Plymouth Police Department</h2>		3400 Plymouth Blvd. • Plymouth, MN 55447 (763) 509-5160 fax: (763) 509-5167			
No.	Type	MOC			
				Date	
		Reported		call	asn arr clr
		Location			
		Occurred		date	time SAA
		Badge no.		report	assist
Person 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Complainant <input type="checkbox"/> Victim <input type="checkbox"/> Witness <input type="checkbox"/> Mentioned					
Name (last, first, middle)			DOB		<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F
Address			home phone		work phone
City, state, zip			school		misc/insurance
Driver's license			<input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> African Am <input type="checkbox"/> Am Indian <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic <input type="checkbox"/> Asian race <input type="checkbox"/> Other		
misc/parents/work					
Person 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Complainant <input type="checkbox"/> Victim <input type="checkbox"/> Witness <input type="checkbox"/> Mentioned					
Name (last, first, middle)			DOB		<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F
address			home phone		work phone
city, state, zip			school		misc/insurance
driver's license			<input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> African Am <input type="checkbox"/> Am Indian <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic <input type="checkbox"/> Asian race <input type="checkbox"/> Other		
misc/parents/work					
<input type="checkbox"/> Additional names/vehicle supplement attached					
Patrol Investigation <input type="checkbox"/> video tape <input type="checkbox"/> audio tape (statement or evidence)					
<input type="checkbox"/> solvability factors		<input type="checkbox"/> photos taken		<input type="checkbox"/> forced entry <input type="checkbox"/> domestic/vic info	
<input type="checkbox"/> written statement		<input type="checkbox"/> prints lifted		<input type="checkbox"/> attached garage <input type="checkbox"/> none	
				victim will prosecute SFD <input type="checkbox"/> yes <input type="checkbox"/> no <input type="checkbox"/>	
Narrative					

<input type="checkbox"/> Continued					
Disposition <input type="checkbox"/> pending <input type="checkbox"/> clear arrest <input type="checkbox"/> clear exceptionally					
<input type="checkbox"/> assist and advised		<input type="checkbox"/> unfounded		Patrol supervisor	Inv Supervisor
				Inv assigned	Entry

Figure 3.3

Types of law enforcement report forms.

Source: Adapted from Kären M. Hess and Henry M. Wroblewski. *For the Record: Report Writing in Law Enforcement*, 5th Edition. Bloomington, MN: Innovative Systems—Publishers, Inc., 2002, p.iv. Reprinted by permission.

SUSPECT 1: (last, first, middle)				DOB		<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F Sex	
address			home phone			work phone	
city, state, zip			ht	wt	hair	eye	school/grade
driver's license			<input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> African Am <input type="checkbox"/> Am Indian <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic <input type="checkbox"/> Asian race <input type="checkbox"/> Other				
parents & work phone			misc				
misc/work							
Patrol Action <input type="checkbox"/> suspect <input type="checkbox"/> juvenile arrest <input type="checkbox"/> no contact <input type="checkbox"/> booked Plymouth Miranda <input type="checkbox"/> adult arrest <input type="checkbox"/> juvenile blue <input type="checkbox"/> warn & release <input type="checkbox"/> booked Hennepin <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> missing person <input type="checkbox"/> school alcohol report <input type="checkbox"/> bail release <input type="checkbox"/> booked JC Attorney requested <input type="checkbox"/> runaway <input type="checkbox"/> parents notified <input type="checkbox"/> citation <input type="checkbox"/> PFC <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No							
SUSPECT 2 (last, first, middle)				DOB		<input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F Sex	
Address			home phone			work phone	
city, state, zip			ht	wt	hair	eye	school/grade
driver's license			<input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> African Am <input type="checkbox"/> Am Indian <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic <input type="checkbox"/> Asian race <input type="checkbox"/> Other				
parents & work phone			misc				
misc/work							
Patrol Action <input type="checkbox"/> suspect <input type="checkbox"/> juvenile arrest <input type="checkbox"/> no contact <input type="checkbox"/> booked Plymouth Miranda <input type="checkbox"/> adult arrest <input type="checkbox"/> juvenile blue <input type="checkbox"/> warn & release <input type="checkbox"/> booked Hennepin <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> missing person <input type="checkbox"/> school alcohol report <input type="checkbox"/> bail release <input type="checkbox"/> booked JC Attorney requested <input type="checkbox"/> runaway <input type="checkbox"/> parents notified <input type="checkbox"/> citation <input type="checkbox"/> PFC <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No							
Property S=stolen D=damaged L=lost THIS SECTION NOT FOR IMPOUNDED PROPERTY <input type="checkbox"/> Inventory report attached							
Victim	Code	Qty	Item	Brand/description/model	Serial #	Value	NCIC
Vehicle #1 <input type="checkbox"/> victim's <input type="checkbox"/> stolen <input type="checkbox"/> recovered <input type="checkbox"/> impounded <input type="checkbox"/> bicycle <input type="checkbox"/> mentioned <input type="checkbox"/> suspect							
Plate #	State	Plate year	Owner				
Make	Model	Year	Color Style				
Vehicle #2 <input type="checkbox"/> victim's <input type="checkbox"/> stolen <input type="checkbox"/> recovered <input type="checkbox"/> impounded <input type="checkbox"/> bicycle <input type="checkbox"/> mentioned <input type="checkbox"/> suspect							
Plate #	State	Plate year	Owner				
Make	Model	Year	Color Style				

By my signature I release all duly authorized peace officers from any legal claim for any damages, loss or expense incurred in the recovery, holding, storage, or conveyance OR verify I am the guardian of a missing juvenile listed in this report.

Signature _____

Figure 3.3
continued

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Have people spell their names. Repeat spellings and numbers for verification. Recheck measurements. Be sure of the accuracy of your facts. An inaccurately recorded license number may result in losing a witness or suspect. Inaccurate measurement or recording of the distance and location of skid marks, bullet holes, or bodies may lead to wrong conclusions.

To be accurate, you must be specific. For example, it is better to say, "The car was traveling in excess of 90 mph" than to say, "The car was traveling fast." It is more accurate to describe a suspect as "approximately six-foot-six" than to describe him as "tall."

You must have the facts in the case correct. If your report says four men were involved in a robbery and in reality, three men and a woman were involved, your report would be inaccurate. If you are unsure of the gender of the individuals involved in an incident, identify them as "people," "suspects," "witnesses," or whatever the case may be. If your facts come from the statement of a witness rather than from your own observation, say so in your report.

Phrases such as "He saw what happened" or "He heard what happened" are conclusionary and may also lead to inaccuracies in your report. People can be looking directly at something and not see it, either because they are simply not paying attention or because they have terrible vision. The same is true of hearing. Again, you do not know what another person sees or hears. Your report should say, "He *said* he saw what happened" or "He looked directly at the man committing the crime."

Another common conclusionary statement found in police reports is, "The check was signed by John Doe." Unless you saw John Doe sign the check, the correct (accurate) statement would be, "The check was signed John Doe." The little two-letter word *by* can create tremendous problems for you on the witness stand.

Vague, imprecise words have no place in police reports. The following words and phrases should *not* be used because they are not specific: *a few, several, many, frequently, often*. Finally, instead of writing *contacted*, be specific by using *telephoned, visited, e-mailed*, or whatever particular mode of communication was involved.

Objective You have seen that reports must be factual. It is possible, however, to include only factual statements in a report and still not be objective. Being **objective** means being nonopinionated, fair, and impartial. Lack of objectivity can result from either of two things: poor word choice or omission of facts.

Word choice is an often overlooked—yet very important—aspect of report writing. Consider, for example, the difference in effect achieved by these three sentences:

The man cried.
The man wept.
The man blubbered.

Although you want to be specific, you must also be aware of the effect of the words you use. Words that have little emotional effect, e.g., *cried*, are called **denotative** words. The denotative meaning of a word is its *objective* meaning. In contrast, words that do have an emotional effect are called **connotative** words, e.g., *wept, blubbered*. The connotative meaning of a word comprises its positive or negative overtones. In the three sentences above, only the first sentence is truly objective. The second sentence makes the reader feel sympathetic toward the man. The third makes the reader unsympathetic.

Likewise, derogatory, biased terms referring to a person's race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual preference have no place in police reports. A defense attorney will certainly capitalize on words with emotional overtones and attempt to show bias. Even the use of *claimed* rather than *stated* can be used to advantage by a defense attorney, who might suggest that the officer's use of *claimed* implies that the officer did not believe the statement.

Also, use the correct word. Do not confuse words that are similar, or you can be made to appear ridiculous. For example, this sentence in an officer's report would probably cast suspicion on the officer's intelligence: "During our training we spent four hours learning to resemble a firearm and the remainder of the time learning defective driving."

Keep to the facts. Include all facts, even those that may appear to be damaging to your case. Objectivity is

Table 3.2 / Avoiding Conclusionary Language

You Can't Live with These	So Use	You Can't Live with These	So Use
Indicated, refused, admitted, confessed, denied, consented, identified, waived, profanity, threatening, obscene, evasive, deceptive	A verbatim or approximate quotation of what was said	Angry, upset, nervous, excited, happy, unhappy, intentional, accidental, heard, saw, knew, thought	The source of your conclusions (when you're attributing them to someone else)
Assaulted, attacked, accosted, confrontation, escalated, struggle ensued, resisted, battered, intimidated, bullied, forced	A factual account of who did what	Matching the description, suspicious, furtive, strange, abnormal, typical, uncooperative, belligerent, combative, obnoxious, abusive, exigent	The reasons for your belief that these apply

attained by including both sides of the account. **Slanting**, that is, including only one side of a story or only facts that tend to prove or support the officer's theory, can also make a report nonobjective. A good report includes both sides of an incident when possible. Even when facts tend to go against your theory about what happened, you are obligated to include them. Omitting important facts is *not* objective.

Complete Information kept in the reporting officer's head is of no value to anyone else involved in the case. An effective report contains answers to at least six basic questions: Who? What? When? Where? How? and Why? The *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where* questions should be answered by factual statements. The *how* and *why* statements may require inferences. When this is the case, clearly label the statements as inferences. This is especially true when answering the question of cause. To avoid slanting the report, record all possible causes no matter how implausible they may seem at the time.

If a form is used for your reports, all applicable blanks at the top of the form should be filled in. Certain agencies require a slash mark, the abbreviation N.A. (not applicable), or the abbreviation UNK (unknown) to be placed in any box that does not contain information.

Each specific type of crime requires different information. Sections 3, 4, and 5 discuss specific offenses and contain checklists outlining information that should be included in your report.

Concise Being **concise** means making every word count without leaving out important facts. Avoid wordiness; length alone does not ensure quality. Some reports can be written in half a page; others require 12 or even 20 pages. No specific length can be prescribed, but strive to include all relevant information in as few words as possible.

You can reduce wordiness in two basic ways: (1) Leave out unnecessary information and (2) use as few words as possible to record the necessary facts. For example, do not write, "The car was blue in color"; write "The car was blue." A phrase such as "information which is of a confidential nature" should be recognized as a wordy way of saying "confidential information."

Do not make the mistake of equating conciseness with brevity. Being brief is not the same as being concise. For example, compare:

Brief:	She drove a car.
Concise:	She drove a maroon 1992 Chevrolet Caprice.
Wordy:	She drove a car that was a 1992 Chevrolet Caprice and was maroon in color.

Avoiding wordiness does not mean eliminating details; it means eliminating empty words and phrases. Consider these examples of how to make wordy phrases more concise:

Wordy	Concise
made a note of the fact that	noted
square in shape	square
in the amount of	for
despite the fact that	although
for the purpose of determining	to determine

Table 3.3 lists more natural-sounding alternatives for wordy, artificial phrases.

Clear An investigation report should have only one interpretation. Two people should be able to read the report and come up with the same word-picture and understanding of the events. Make certain your sentences can be read only one way. For example, consider the following unclear sentences:

- When completely plastered, officers who volunteer will paint the locker room.
- Miami police kill a man with a machete.
- Three cars were reported stolen by the Los Angeles police yesterday.
- Police begin campaign to run down jaywalkers.
- Squad helps dog bite victim.

Rewrite such sentences so that only one interpretation is possible. For example, the first sentence in the previous list might read: "Officers who volunteer will paint the locker room after it is completely plastered." The third sentence might read: "According to the Los Angeles police, three cars were reported stolen yesterday."

Follow these guidelines to make your reports clearer:

- *Use specific, concrete facts and details.* Compare the following statements and determine which is clearer:
 1. The car sped away and turned the corner.
 2. The gold 1996 Cadillac Fleetwood pulled away from the curb, accelerated to approximately 65 mph, and then turned off First Street onto Brooklyn Boulevard.

The second statement is clearer because it contains concrete facts and details.
- *Keep descriptive words and phrases as close as possible to the words they describe.* Compare the following statements and determine which is clearer.
 1. He replaced the gun into the holster which he had just fired.
 2. He replaced the gun, which he had just fired, into the holster.

The second statement is clearer because the phrase "which he had just fired" is placed close to the word it modifies (*gun*).

Table 3.3 / Artificial-Sounding vs. Natural-Sounding Words and Phrases

Artificial	Natural	Artificial	Natural
initiated	began	altercation	fight
commenced		mutual combat	
inaugurated		physical confrontation	
originated		exchange of physical blows	
presently	now	in reference to	about
currently		reference	
at the present		in regard to	
at the present time		regarding	
at this time		on the subject of	
due to the fact that	because, since	visually perceived	saw
considering that		visually noticed	
as a result of the fact that		observed	
in view of the fact that		viewed	
in light of the fact that			
made an effort	tried	related	said
made an attempt		stated	
endeavored		verbalized	
attempted		articulated	

Source: Devallis Rutledge. *The New Police Report Manual*, 2nd ed. Belmont, CA Wadsworth Publishing Company, 2000, pp.75-78. Reprinted by permission.

- *Use diagrams and sketches when a description is complex.* This is especially true in reports of crashes, homicides, and burglaries. The diagrams do not have to be artistic masterpieces. They should, however, be in approximate proportion and should help the reader follow the narrative portion of the report. As noted in Chapter 2, software for computer-assisted diagrams are now readily available.
- *Do not use uncommon abbreviations.* Some abbreviations (such as *Mr., Dr., Ave., St., Feb., Aug., NY, CA*) are so commonly used that they require no explanation. Other abbreviations, however, are commonly used only in law enforcement. Do not use these in your reports, since not all readers will understand them. Confusion can result if two people have different interpretations of an abbreviation. For example, what does S.O.B. mean to you? To most people it has a negative meaning. But for people in the health field, it means "short of breath." Meier and Adams (p.102) provide this example as something that can be used in your notes but should not appear, as such, in a report:

Unk/B/M/, nfd, driving unk/Chry/4DBlu, nfd
Instead, write out:

Unknown black male (no further description available) was seen driving a blue Chrysler 4-door (no further description available).

Use only abbreviations common to everyone.

- *Use short sentences, well organized into short paragraphs.* Short sentences are easier to read. Likewise, paragraphs should be relatively short, usually five to ten sentences. Each question to be answered in the report should have its own paragraph. The report should be organized logically. Most commonly it begins with *when* and *where* and then tells *who* and *what*. The *what* should be in chronological order—that is, going from beginning to end without skipping back and forth.

Grammatically and Mechanically Correct If you were to *hear* the words "Your chances of being promoted are good if you can write effective reports," you would probably feel differently than if you were to *read* the

Table 3.3 / *continued*

Artificial	Natural	Artificial	Natural
maintained surveillance over	watched	informed	told
kept under observation		advised	
visually monitored		indicated	
		communicated verbally	
at this point	then	6' in height	6' tall/high
at this time		2' in width	2' wide
at which time		3' in length	3' long
at which point in time		8" in depth	8" deep
as of this date	yet	telephonically contacted	phoned
as of this time		reached via landline	
as of the present time		contacted by telephone	
alighted from	got out	verbal altercation	argument
exited		verbal dispute	
dismounted		verbal confrontation	
requested	asked	prior to	before
inquired		previous to	
queried		in advance of	
in order to	to	for the reason that	so
with the intention of		in order that	
with the objective to			

same words written like this: “yur chansen of bein promottid are gud. if you kin rite afectiv riports.” The **mechanics**—spelling, capitalization, and punctuation—involved in translating ideas and spoken words into written words are important. Yet, as Clark (p.56) observes: “Probably the most common writing error police officers make is misspelled words.” Mistakes in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar give the impression that the writer is careless, uneducated, or stupid—maybe all three!

Use a dictionary and a grammar book if in doubt about how to write something. The dictionary can tell you not only how to spell a word but also whether it should be capitalized and how it should be abbreviated. To make spelling less difficult, consider using a *speller/divider*. These little reference books contain thousands of the most commonly used words, showing their spelling and how they are divided. The reader is not distracted by definitions, information on the history of

the word, synonyms, and so on. The most important advantage is that one speller/divider page has as many words on it as 15 to 20 dictionary pages.

Use caution when relying on grammar- and spell-checker programs to find mistakes in computerized documents. Sievert (p.37) observes:

In what is probably the ultimate irony, one of the solutions to improved report writing is also one of the causes of imprecise writing. Studies indicate word processor Grammar Check functions will catch about 60% of the errors. This is a benefit to the average writer, yet reliance on Grammar Check reduces the skill set of the writer and leaves almost half the errors unflagged. Even worse, the Spell Checker provides an accurate spelling, but it does not check meaning—resulting, at times, in the grotesque misuse of a word.

For example, if an investigator wrote that a victim of an assault was unable to be interviewed because “she had lapsed into a *comma*,” or that a suspect had been

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restrained because “he was acting *erotically*,” when what the writer meant to say was “coma” and “erratically,” respectively, the reader might question the investigator’s intelligence and/or attention to detail.

Written in Standard English People often disagree about what standard English is. And the standards between spoken and written English differ. For example, if you were to say, “I’m gonna go walkin’ in the mornin’,” it would probably sound all right. People often drop the “g” when they speak. In writing, however, this is not acceptable.

Just as there are rules for spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, there are rules for *what* words are used *when*. For example, it is standard to say “he doesn’t” rather than “he don’t”; “I don’t have any” rather than “I ain’t got none”; “he and I are partners” rather than “him and me are partners.”

Your experience with English will often tell you what is standard and what is not—especially if you have lived in surroundings in which standard English is used. If you speak standard English, you will probably also write in standard English. But that is not always true.

Paragraphs As discussed earlier, in structuring the narrative and making your report clear, effective writers use paragraphs to guide the reader. Keep the paragraphs short (usually 100 words or less). Skip a line to indicate the beginning of a new paragraph. Discuss only one subject in each paragraph. Start a new paragraph when you change speakers, locations, time, or ideas—for example, when you go from observations to descriptions to statements.

Paragraphs are reader friendly, guiding the reader through your report. Most paragraphs should be 5 to 6 sentences, although they may be a single sentence or up to 10 or 15 sentences on occasion.

Past Tense Write in the **past tense** throughout the report. Past-tense writing uses verbs that show that events have already occurred. Your report contains what *was* true at the time you took your notes. Use of present tense can cause tremendous problems later. For example, suppose you wrote, “John Doe *lives* at 100 South Street and *works* for Ace Trucking Company.” One year later you find yourself on the witness stand with a defense attorney asking you: “Now, Officer, your report says that John Doe lives at 100 South Street. Is that correct?” You may not know, and you would have to say so. The next question: “Now, Officer, your report says John Doe works for Ace Trucking Company. Is *that* correct?” Again, you may be uncertain and be forced into an “I don’t know” response. Use of the past tense in your report avoids this problem.

First Person Use the first person to refer to yourself. **First person** in English uses the words *I*, *me*, *my*, *we*, *us*, and *our*. The sentence “*I* responded to the call” is written in the first person. This is in contrast to “*This officer* responded to the call,” which uses the third person.

Whether you remember your English classes and discussions of first-, second-, and third-person singular and plural is irrelevant. Simply remember to refer to yourself as *I* rather than as *this officer*.

Active Voice A sentence may be either active or passive. This is an easy distinction to make if you think about what the words *active* and *passive* mean. (Forget about the term *voice*; it is a technical grammatical term you do not need to understand to write well.) In the **active voice** the subject of the sentence performs the actions—for example, “I wrote the report.” This is in contrast to the *passive* voice, in which the subject does nothing—for example, “The report was written by me.” The report did not do anything. The problem with the passive voice is that often the *by* is left off—for example, “The report was written.” Later, no one knows who did the writing. Passive voice results in a “whodunit” that can have serious consequences in court.

Statements are usually clearer in the active voice. Although most sentences should be in the active voice, a *passive* sentence is acceptable in the following situations:

1. If the doer of the action is unknown, unimportant, or obvious.

Example: The gun had been fired three times.

We don’t know who fired it. This is better than “Someone had fired the gun three times.”

Example: The woman has been arrested four times.

Who arrested her each time is not important.

Example: Felix Umburger was paroled in April.

Who is obviously the parole board.

2. When you want to call special attention to the receiver of the action rather than the doer.

Example: Officer Morris was promoted after the examination.

Not only is it unimportant who promoted him, you want to call attention to Officer Morris.

3. When it would be unfair or embarrassing to be mentioned by name.

Example: The program was postponed because the wrong film was sent.

Better than: The program was postponed because Sergeant Fairchild sent the wrong film.

Example: Insufficient evidence was gathered at the crime scene.

Better than: Investigator Hanks gathered insufficient evidence at the crime scene.

Audience Focused Always consider who your audience is. Recall the diversity of possible readers of police reports. Given these varied backgrounds and individuals with limited familiarity with law enforcement terminology, the necessity for audience-focused reports becomes obvious. By keeping in mind this diverse audience, you will construct a report that is reader friendly.

One way to be reader friendly is to be certain that the narrative portion of your report can stand alone. That calls for eliminating such phrases as *the above*. A reader-friendly report does not begin, “On the above date at the above time, I responded to the above address to investigate a burglary in progress.”

Using such phrases presents two problems. First, if readers take time to look “above” to find the information, their train of thought is broken. It is difficult to find where to resume reading, and time is wasted. Second, if readers do *not* take time to look “above,” important information is not conveyed, and it is very likely that the reader, perhaps subconsciously, will be wondering what would have been found “above.” If information is important enough to refer to in your report, include it in the narrative. Do not take the lazy approach and ask your reader to search for the information “above.”

Another way to write a reader-friendly report is to steer clear of police lingo and other bureaucratic language and use plain English. Meier and Adams (p.99) point out that officers tend to speak and write in a dialect of English they call “Cop Speak,” which the majority of the public often does not understand. In explaining why investigators and other law enforcement officers should avoid jargon and other “insider” terminology when communicating with those outside the field, Moore (p.266) notes: “This type of language makes it seem as if you don’t share the same language as the public you serve. It goes against the basic principles of community policing and sets criminal justice agencies and their personnel apart from the very people they rely on for information, funding and authority.”

Legible and On Time It does little good to learn to write well if no one can read it or if the report is turned in after it was needed. Ideally, reports should be typed; and in today’s computer-driven world, most reports are generated this way. Sometimes, however, this is not practical or possible. In fact, a poorly typed report is often as difficult to read as an illegible one. If you do not type your reports, and if you know that you have poor handwriting, you may want to print your reports by hand. Granted, this is slower than cursive, but a report that cannot be read is of little use to anyone. Whether your reports are typed, written, or printed, make certain that others can read them easily and that they are submitted on time.

Taping and Dictating Reports

Tape-recording or dictating reports is common in some departments. Reports that need quick attention may be red-tagged, and records personnel type all red-tagged cases first.

In effect, tape-recording or dictating reports shifts the bulk of writing/transcribing time to the records

Technology Innovations

A new technology called the Intuitive Pen recognizes handwriting, taking what an officer has written and converting it into an electronic form, thereby reducing redundancies and increasing the efficiency and accuracy of the report generating process. Simon (p.96) explains:

This pen can save officers time since data collected in the field will not need to be retyped. Every stroke created by this pen is saved. . . . To retrieve the information, the pen is inserted into the docking station, which is connected to a computer through a USB cable. This information is then transferred to the computer and the software converts it into typed text within the form.

While many investigators carry PDAs [personal digital assistants] or tablet PCs [personal computers] to record information, such devices are not configured to allow a fast, easy switch between the various pre-loaded forms officers use to enter important data, as is often needed in a rapidly unfolding or emergency situation. The Intuitive Pen, however, is able to effectively and accurately capture information that is not collected sequentially.

The pen can be interfaced with a report management system that automatically converts the data into an appropriate format for use in a department’s reports. Furthermore, it can be used as part of an evidence tracking program, creating an evidence receipt copy in the field and then being docked at the station, with the data retrieved and used to print barcode labels for all evidence collected (p.99).

Another advance is computer-assisted report entry (CARE). This live-entry system centers around a CARE operator who leads officers through preformatted screens and questions, allowing them to complete reports in a matter of minutes. The CARE system has reduced report-writing times and improved the quality, accuracy, and timeliness of police reports. In addition, Uniform Crime Reporting information is automatically aggregated.

Although computerized report writing has greatly increased officers’ efficiency, it cannot correct sloppy data entry. Officers are responsible for the accuracy and clarity of the data. The accuracy and clarity of a report are often deciding factors in whether a case is prosecuted. Preparing for and presenting cases in court are discussed in Chapter 21.

division. Even with taping or dictating, however, officers must still take final responsibility for what is contained in the report. Do not assume that what you think you spoke into a dictation machine is what will end up on paper. Following are some humorous illustrations of how some dictated sentences can be misinterpreted:

- He called for a toe truck.
- Smith was arrested for a mister meaner.
- Jones was a drug attic.
- The victim was over rot.
- Johnson died of a harder tack.

Computerized Report Writing

Computers have made significant contributions to efficiency in report writing. The hardware available for word processing has become smaller and faster (Figure 3.4). It is easier to use and much more portable. Software too has kept pace. In addition to sophisticated spell- and grammar-checker programs (to be used with the caveats noted above under “Grammatically and Mechanically Correct”), other programs have been developed to help in the actual preparation of police reports. Pen-based computers also make report writing easier. Pen computing uses a special “pen” to write on a computer screen.

How many times have you heard, “Great job. Now do it again”? Simon (p.94) notes that this phrase can deflate the morale of anyone who has gone to great lengths to ensure accuracy and completeness the first time a task is completed. Yet police officers encounter this “do it again” hurdle every time they fill out a report. The task of report writing is filled with redundancies—turning handwritten

notes into typed reports, sometimes filling out numerous forms along the way, all involving the same basic information garnered from the initial note-taking event. Each transfer of data not only takes time from an investigator but also introduces an opportunity for error—a transposed number or two, a misspelled name, a detail that gets overlooked and never makes it to the final report.

Evaluating Your Report

Once you have written your report, evaluate it. Do not simply add the final period, staple the pages together, and turn it in. Reread it. Make certain it says what you want it to and contains no content or composition errors. Ask yourself if the report is factual, accurate, objective, complete, concise, clear, grammatically and mechanically correct, written in standard English, organized into paragraphs, written in the past tense, uses the first person and active voice, and is audience focused and legible. Table 3.4 provides an evaluation checklist for investigative reports.

Citizen Online Report Writing

A new trend allows citizens to file crime reports online, which has the potential of easing reporting delays for those jurisdictions suffering from staffing shortages and/or unmanageable caseloads. Necessarily, online reporting is used only for discovery crimes, not involvement crimes, and is most appropriate for property crimes where no suspect information is available (Smith, p.41). In accessing



Figure 3.4

Law enforcement officers rely heavily on computers to generate reports quickly. Attention to detail is still necessary for reports to be accurate.

Table 3.4 / Evaluation Checklist for Reports

Is the Report:
Factual?
Accurate?
Objective?
Complete?
Chronological?
Concise?
Clear?
Mechanically correct?
Grammatically correct?
Written in standard English?
Organized into paragraphs?
Does the Report Use:
First person?
Active voice?
Past tense?
Are the Sentences Mechanically Correct in Terms of:
Spelling?
Capitalization?
Punctuation?
Abbreviations?
Is the Report Audience Focused and Legible?
Does the Report Allow the Reader to Visualize What Happened?

Source: Adapted from Kären M. Hess and Henry M. Wroblewski. *For the Record: Report Writing in Law Enforcement*, 5th ed. Bloomington, MN: Innovative Systems-Publishers, Inc., 2002, p.196. Used with permission.

the local department's website and pulling up the page with the crime report form, citizens are able to complete an online report with such required fields as name, address, type of incident, or loss experienced, etc. Before the citizen can submit the report, a warning appears stating the penalties for filing a false report.

Once submitted, the report can be retrieved and proofed by a records clerk in the police department, who determines whether the report is valid and assigns a case number to those meeting the predetermined criteria. Some systems allow the report to be directly downloaded into the department's records management system, and some generate a confirmation postcard containing the case number, which is sent to the person who submitted the report. An increasing number of departments are switching to e-mail confirmation.

Smith (p.41) notes, however, that limitations exist as to which crimes can or should be reported via the Internet: "It is important that any crimes in which the victim knows, or can identify, the suspect are not reported online. Cases with known suspects should be reported through normal

procedures to ensure that the proper information is collected for follow-up investigation."

The Final Report



The culmination of the preceding steps is the final, or prosecution, report, containing all essential information for bringing a case to trial. The final report will be examined more closely in Chapter 21, as part of preparing a case for court.

A Final Note on the Importance of Well-Written Reports



Given the many uses of reports and the number of individuals who rely on them, the importance of reports should now be clear. What is key here is to make these necessary documents as well written as possible, thus maximizing the benefits they can provide. A report written well the first time means less time spent rewriting it. A well-written report also keeps everyone involved in the case up-to-speed and clear on the facts, which can lead to higher prosecution rates, more plea bargains, fewer trials, and an easing of caseloads on the court system. A well-written report can also save an investigator from spending an inordinate amount of time on the witness stand, attempting to explain any omissions, errors, or points of confusion found in poorly written reports. All of these benefits ultimately save the department time and expense.

In today's litigious society, where anyone can sue anyone else for practically anything, law enforcement is not immune to becoming the target of a lawsuit. For this reason, well-written reports can reduce legal liability for both the officer and the department by clearly documenting the actions taken throughout the investigation.

A final benefit of well-written reports is to the writer, in that they can greatly enhance an officer's career by reflecting positively on the investigator's education, competence, and professionalism.



A well-written report helps the criminal justice system operate more efficiently and effectively, saves the department time and expense, reduces liability for the department and the officer, and reflects positively on the investigator who wrote it.

Figures 3.5 and 3.6 are examples of a poorly written and a well-written report, respectively.

You are the Police Chief. It's a busy Monday morning, and Mayor Brown calls you in a panic. A dozen reporters are outside her office wanting information about the robbery at Helen's Liquor Store. She wants you to come to her office to answer these questions. You have five minutes to review the report submitted by Officer Clueless, who is off for three days picking blueberries in Wisconsin. You grab the report and your cold cup of coffee and start down the hall, reading . . .

Figure 3.5

Example of a bad police report.

Courtesy of Detective Richard Gautsch. Reprinted with permission.

Report of Officer Iam Clueless

This officer was working the middle shift to cover for Officer Johnson who had called in sick. While on routine patrol in the north shopping center at the above listed time I responded with lights and siren in accordance with our policy to a report of a robbery at Helen's Liquor Store. The perp had been arrested by officer Andrews driving northbound several blocks from the scene. When this officer arrived at the above listed address there were two men standing near the front door. The clerk was frightened bad and nearly out of control as he walked back into the store. He said he'd been ripped off by a man wearing orange colored coveralls, a blue baseball cap about 40 years old, 6', with big ears weighing about 200 pounds who pushed him against the wall and grabbed money from the till and a gun had been fired as he exited the front door. No one was hurt and this officer decided not to request an ambulance. The other witness followed us into the store and was obviously drunk and also adorned in coveralls orange in color and two sizes too big, which made him look sloppy. This witness proceeded to the main door and a piece was pointed out a short distance from the sidewalk where the perp must have thrown it. The clerk indicated that he knew the guy and that there were regular customers. This officer asked the clerk if he could make a positive identification of the party and he acknowledged in the affirmative. I new Officer Andrews was 10-12 with one and I asked him his ETA. He said he was waiting for a CSO to stand by for the hook, but there always late and we needed a new system for tows. He snapped your just gonna have to wait, I'll get there ASAP. He said he thought we were close enough in time to do a one on one showup and this officer concurred. When I first arrived at the scene, this officer was of the opinion that the man in the orange colored coveralls was acting strange and may have been thinking about booking on me. I contemplated cuffing him, but the PC was a little weak. I engaged the party in further conversation to ascertain whether he'd offer additional incriminating evidence or make a damaging utterance. Having recently attended training in the latest Miranda rulings, this officer surmised he was within his rights to converse with the subject since he wasn't in custody and he hadn't lawyered up. As I asked him questions, he became defensive and moved in a suspicious manner. It became evident that he had drug and alcohol problems and this officer made the decision to render the firearm safe and secure it in the trunk of my squad. On the arrival of Officer Andrews, the clerk shouted out the door that their brothers and of course he can identify him. Officer Andrews then rolled up and lowered his window. The clerk went hysterical and screamed that he owed him a hundred bucks. Both witnesses positively identified the suspect sitting in the back seat with a sour look. Officer Andrews gave the clerk back a hundred dollars and transported the suspect who was wearing orange colored coveralls and a blue hat to the PD for booking. He identified the defendant as Bart Jennings, 5-11-65. The suspect confessed in front of us and totally exonerated his brother. The clerk calmed down and asked when he'd get the gun back. I said that was up to the detectives and cleared the scene at 5624 Forest Street. This officer identified the witnesses as Stanley Jennings and Thomas Benson. See above for addresses and DOB's. END OF REPORT

End of report, and you're scratching your head, thinking, "Huh?" You've just finished 626 words of confusion when you arrive at the mayor's office to brief the media. No sooner have you finished providing the few facts of the case you were actually able to glean from this report when reporters start shooting questions at you:

- Who fired the gun? (passive sentence—don't know)
- Whose gun was it? (pronoun reference—don't know)
- How much money was taken? (doesn't say)
- Who owed the clerk \$100? (pronoun reference)
- How much did the suspect's ears weigh? (misplaced modifier)

"Where's Helen's Liquor Store?" one reporter asks. You scan the report but can't find the address easily because it's buried near the end, out of chronological order.

Abbreviations and acronyms, jargon and slang, opinions and conclusions, ears that weigh 200 pounds. This report is a disaster! you think to yourself as the pack of reporters disperses and you head back to your office. If only the case had been handled by Officer Gotta Clue. It would have read something like . . .

Report of Officer Gotta Clue

On 10-20-04 at 1900 hours, I was dispatched to Helen's Liquor Store (5624 Forest Street) regarding a robbery. I arrived at 1905 and saw the victim, Thomas Benson, and a witness, Stanley Jennings, standing outside the front door. Both men identified themselves with Minnesota driver's licenses. I followed Benson into the store.

Benson paced and his hands trembled as he spoke. He told me that at 1845 hours a customer pushed him against the wall, grabbed about \$100 from the cash register, and ran from the store. The robber dropped a handgun outside the door as he left, and it fired. Benson described the man as white, about 40 years old, 6 feet tall, 200 pounds, with big ears. He wore orange coveralls and a blue baseball hat. Benson said he knew the man and could identify him.

As I spoke with Benson, S. Jennings came into the store and stood by the front door. He was wearing orange coveralls, swayed from side to side, and repeatedly moved his hands in and out of his pockets. His eyes were red and watery, and I smelled the odor of an alcoholic beverage on his breath. S. Jennings opened the door and pointed at a Colt 38 caliber revolver in the grass about 6 feet west of the sidewalk.

After marking the location of the revolver with an evidence tag, I placed the gun in the trunk of my squad for safety reasons.

At 1910 hours Officer Andrews contacted me by radio. He had detained Bart Jennings (5-11-65) several blocks north of Helen's Liquor Store. Andrews brought B. Jennings back to the liquor store at 1925 hours. B. Jennings was wearing orange coveralls, a blue baseball cap, and had big ears. He stayed in the back seat of the squad. (Please see Officer Andrews' arrest report.)

Benson ran toward the squad and shouted, "That's him, that's the creep. He owes me 100 bucks." He also told me that Stanley and Bart Jennings were brothers.

S. Jennings leaned against the front door of the store and said, "Yup, that's him."

B. Jennings shifted forward in his seat and stated, "I done it, but I didn't use no gun. It just fell out of my pocket. And Stan didn't know I was going to do it."

Officer Andrews transported B. Jennings to the Police Department. I told Benson and S. Jennings that a detective would contact them. I logged the gun into evidence.

Case referred to Investigations.

Figure 3.6

Example of a good police report.

Courtesy of Detective Richard Gautsch. Reprinted with permission.

Compare Clueless's report with Clue's. No contest. Clue's report attends to both content and form and is:

- Factual—numerous examples such as description of S. Jennings' actions and appearance: "swayed from side to side," "eyes were red and watery," and "odor of an alcoholic beverage on his breath," as opposed to Clueless's description: "obviously drunk" (conclusionary)
- Accurate—again, many examples, such as "revolver in the grass about six feet west of the sidewalk" instead of "a piece was pointed out a short distance from the sidewalk"
- Objective—"Benson ran toward the squad and shouted" versus "the clerk went hysterical and screamed"
- Complete—answers the six questions, Who? What? Where? When? How? and Why? In contrast, Clueless's report is filled with off-topic, extraneous information that clutters the report: It does not matter that Clueless was covering for Johnson, who had called in sick, or that Clueless had recently attended training in the latest Miranda rulings.
- Chronological—starts with the dispatch, ends with disposition
- Concise—431 words, compared with 626
- Clear—"Benson described the man as . . . 200 pounds, with big ears," compared with "with big ears weighing about 200 pounds." Officer Clue's report contained no uncommon abbreviations or acronyms
- Mechanically correct—no errors in spelling, punctuation, or capitalization
- Grammatically correct—proper word usage
- Written in standard English—no jargon ("lawyered up") or slang ("piece" instead of revolver)
- Organized into paragraphs—Clueless's is one long, disorganized paragraph
- Written in the past tense
- Written in first person, not "this officer"
- Written using the active voice

Officer Gotta Clue's report is audience focused and allows the reader to visualize what happened. It leaves the reader with a positive impression of the writer's competence.

SUMMARY

Reports are permanent written records of important facts of a case to be used in the future. They are a crucial and necessary cog in the wheel of justice.

Reports are used to examine the past, keep other police officers informed, continue investigations, prepare court cases, provide the courts with relevant facts, coordinate law enforcement activities, plan for future law enforcement services, evaluate individual officer and department performance, refresh a witness's memory as to what he or she said occurred, refresh the investigating officer's memory during the trial, compile statistics on crime in a given jurisdiction, and provide information to insurance investigators. Reports are read by other officers, supervisors, attorneys and judges, jurors, city officials, insurance adjusters and investigators, citizens, and reporters.

Among the common problems in police reports are:

- Confusing or unclear sentences.
- Conclusions, assumptions, and opinions.
- Extreme wordiness and overuse of police jargon and abbreviations.
- Missing or incomplete information.
- Misspelled words and grammatical/mechanical errors.
- Referring to "above" information.

The effective report writer attends to both content and form, as they are equally important in a well-written report. An effective report is factual. A fact is a statement that can be proven; an inference is a conclusion based on reasoning; and an opinion is a personal belief. A well-written report is also accurate, objective, complete, concise, clear, grammatically and mechanically correct, written in standard English, organized into paragraphs, written in the past tense, uses the first person and active voice, and is audience focused and legible, leaving the reader with a positive impression of the writer's competence. It is also submitted on time.

A well-written report helps the criminal justice system operate more efficiently and effectively, saves the department time and expense, reduces liability for the department and the officer, and reflects positively on the investigator who wrote it.

CHECKLIST

Report Writing

- Have I made a rough outline and organized my notes?
- Have I included all relevant information?
- Have I included headings?

- Have I proofread the paper to spot content and composition errors?
- Have I submitted all required reports on time?
- Have both negative and positive information been submitted to the prosecuting attorney?

DISCUSSION

QUESTIONS

1. What is the *most* important use of reports?
2. Do you think notes should be retained or destroyed after a report has been written?
3. How important are reports for prosecution of a case?
4. Is time a factor in the quality of reports?
5. Can the content and form of a report actually be separated?
6. What gives you the most difficulty in writing reports?
7. What are your strengths in report writing?
8. Are you familiar with any report-writing software? If so, what is your opinion of the program(s)?
9. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having citizens use online reporting?
10. How do you feel about having to submit both positive and negative information to the prosecuting attorney?

MEDIA

EXPLORATIONS



Internet

Search for *report writing in law enforcement*. Find one article relevant to writing offense reports, outline it, and share your outline with the class.



Crime and Evidence in Action

Go to the CD and choose the drug bust/gang homicide/sexual assault case. During the course of the case you'll become patrol officer, detective, defense attorney, and corrections officer to conduct interactive investigative research. Each case unfolds as you respond to key decision points. Feedback for each possible answer choice is packed full of information, including term definitions, Web links, and important documentation. The sergeant is available at certain times to help mentor you, the Online Resources website offers a variety of information, and be sure to take

notes in your e-notebook during the suspect video statements and at key points throughout (these notes can be saved, printed, or e-mailed). The Forensics Exercise will test your ability to collect, transport, and analyze evidence from the crime scene. At the end of the case, you can track how well you responded to each decision point and join the Discussion Forum for a postmortem. **Go to the CD and use the skills you've learned in this chapter to solve a case.**

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