

INVESTIGATIVE REPORT WRITING MANUAL

FOR

LAW ENFORCEMENT

AND SECURITY

PERSONNEL

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Steve Winston is a background investigator with the Santa Ana Police Department. He has conducted thousands of background investigations and completed the associated administrative reports.

You will be the beneficiary of a collaboration of these individuals in creating a new and improved Investigative Report Writing Manual. Study and practice the exercises dedicating yourself to the lifelong goal of 'being better tomorrow than you were today'.

INVESTIGATIVE REPORT WRITING MANUAL

FOR

LAW ENFORCEMENT & SECURITY PERSONNEL

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Basic investigative report writing concepts, whether for private security or for law enforcement, rarely change, but formats often do. Therefore, it makes sense to teach formats that are widely accepted. Most of the concepts discussed in this manual are consistent with reports from other professions. The Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (P.O.S.T.) has established guidelines for investigative report writing, and this manual emphasizes those concepts and standards.

In this manual we have attempted to address the most frequently recurring problems officers seem to have with their report writing. Contents of this manual are a result of many years of report writing instruction to law enforcement and private security personnel. A good report is the direct result of the officer's investigation. Report writing and investigative techniques go hand-in-hand. You can't have one without the other, so we made it a point in this manual to address the investigative steps necessary for a superior police report.

Officers should ALWAYS consult with their own organization and/or local prosecutor for clarification of any local laws and/or policies. This is especially critical when establishing the elements of the crime, and following the procedures for handling a particular investigation.

The goal of report writing is to tell the reader specifically what happened. If you understand that every complete sentence should have a noun and a verb, you're halfway to that goal. If you understand the concept of chronological order and its importance in painting an accurate picture of what occurred, you're three quarters of the way there. And if anyone with a basic high school education can read and understand your report, you're almost home. Writing simple, descriptive sentences and paragraphs completes the picture. Practicing the techniques outlined in this manual will result in a superior performance.

We will do our best to make you a better report writer. We have developed a variety of exercises that are intended to increase your level of competency. The exercises range from basic grammar and report writing to investigation and interviewing techniques. They are designed to both keep you interested and to encourage the acquisition of basic knowledge and the fundamentals of report writing. You will not be hired in law enforcement unless you write well because your reports are a reflection on you and the department.

INVESTIGATIVE REPORT WRITING MANUAL

FOR

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND

SECURITY PERSONNEL

CHAPTER 1

HOW REPORTS ARE USED

In this chapter, you will learn what makes an excellent report and how reports are used:

- *as a basis for criminal cases; as a basis for civil cases, including insurance, health department, risk management, or environmental (AQMD)*
- *as a source of statistical information*
- *to supply information to newspapers and the media*
- *to evaluate the officer*
- *by various reviewing audiences*
- *to document different types of incidents*

WHAT MAKES AN EXCELLENT REPORT

An excellent report is one that is well-written, and is identified by six basic, necessary qualities. A well-written report is:

- 1) Factual
- 2) Accurate
- 3) Clear
- 4) Concise
- 5) Complete
- 6) Timely

Deficiency in any of these areas cast doubts upon the capabilities of the officer who wrote the report.

“Report writing ability” refers not just to writing skills, but to the totality of skills—perceptual, analytical, information processing and language—that work together to produce a written document.

Factual: The report contains only facts. A fact is a thing that has actually happened or that is really true.

Accurate: The report is free from mistakes or errors. It is precise. It is exact.

Clear: The report is free from confusion and ambiguity and is easily understood.

Concise: The report states much in (relatively) few words by removing all expanded or superfluous details.

Complete: The report includes all necessary information: such as who, what, when, where, why and how. All of the elements of the crime are also included in the report.

Timely: The report should be completed as soon as possible.

Additional characteristics of a well-written report:

Grammatically Correct: The report has been written using the proper form and arrangement of words and sentence structure.

Legible: The report has been put down on paper in handwriting or printing that is readable, that can be read or deciphered easily. Legibility means writing or printing that is not “chicken scratch” or indecipherable “scribbling.” Can the reader easily tell what the words are?

Objective: The writer has not injected his or her own bias or prejudice into the report.

MOST COMMON UTILIZATION OF REPORTS

Criminal and Civil Cases

Reports are written to document events. For law enforcement agencies, such documentation is important for future criminal prosecution as well as for liability in future civil litigation. In their original form, the reports are reviewed by detectives and supervisors, then read by the prosecuting and defense attorneys. Typically, the district attorneys base their decisions to file criminal charges on the contents of the original reports. These reports are also used to coordinate additional criminal investigations.

Reports can assist detectives in identifying methods of operations (M.O.), certain crime trends, and can link similar or related crimes and criminal activity together in an attempt to identify the perpetrator.

Reports are frequently used to assist officers and other participants to refresh their memories for testifying in court.

For private security companies, reports most often tend to be used to document events by which the client could or would be affected. Incidents such as slip-and-fall accidents, crimes, internal losses, etc., are issues that cost the client money, and therefore, are directly affected by the effectiveness of the security company and its personnel. Adequate documentation in such cases can save both the client and the security company time and money.

Of course, similar investigation and documentation are requirements in other professions, too. Professionals such as insurance investigators, private investigators, risk management investigators, human resources personnel, health department inspectors, code enforcement officers, etc., all deal with volatile incidents that could potentially expose an organization or individual to financial liability as well as harm the reputation of that organization or individual.

Statistical Information

Statistics compiled weekly, monthly, and yearly help local law enforcement agencies determine how to better allocate resources and to justify their activities. States collect their own crime statistics, which are then published yearly. Nationally, law enforcement agencies report certain criminal incidents to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which then publishes a yearly report on all criminal activity within the country. This statistical information, along with the actual reports, provides evidence that the agency is meeting the needs of the community.

Newspapers and Other Media

In most instances, crime reports are available to radio, television and newspaper representatives. Much of what these organizations report is based upon the information contained in the report.

Officer Evaluation

Supervisors commonly use an officer's reports to judge how well the officer does his or her job. The report provides information about the officer's abilities, education, training, and deficiencies. An officer's reports reveal to a supervisor how an officer organizes his or her thoughts.

Reviewing Audience

In addition to being used within the agency, reports are commonly read by other parties such as:

- Regulatory and Law Enforcement Agencies (code enforcement, Department of Justice, and Department of Motor Vehicles.)
- Court Staff (prosecution and defense attorneys, judges, and clerical staff)
- Administrators (city, county, and state officials)
- Insurance Companies (attorneys, investigators, and clerical staff)
- Jurors (in both civil and criminal trials)
- Media (newspaper, television, and radio reporters)

TYPES OF REPORTS

A report is a written document characterized by a particular style and format, which describes an event or incident, thereby providing information. It can be said that the report is a formal statement or official account. Most organizations use specific printed forms on which to record information; these forms may sometimes be on computer disks or hard-drives as report templates.

Reports vary according to how they are used and why they are written. Here are some of the different types of reports:

Arrest Report: An arrest report is written whenever a person is arrested. This report must include the probable cause for the detention, arrest, and disposition of the suspect.

Clearance Report: A clearance report states the end result to a specific case. It might be the arrest of a suspect, the recovery of property, or the filing of a complaint. It brings the case to a conclusion.

Crime Report: A crime report is written after the investigating officer concludes that a crime has occurred. A crime report must include all the elements of the crime and should include all information regarding the crime at the time the report was taken, such as location, the time and place the crime occurred, loss or injuries, evidence collected, suspect description, etc. A crime report form tends to be a generic pre-printed form that can be used to document any criminal occurrence.

Event or Incident Report: An event or incident report is used to document events not considered criminal. Such events may be medical aid calls, civil disputes, citizen assists, and the like. Some agencies call these Service or Miscellaneous reports.

Evidence Collection Report: An evidence collection report establishes the chain of evidence, such as who discovered the evidence, when and where it was located, who collected it, and its disposition.

Memorandum: A memorandum is generally used to request information or to answer a request for information. It is less formal than the crime or incident report but can be just as important. Memorandums are commonly used to pass on information from shift to shift, to document minor disciplinary actions, vacation requests, training information, etc.

Narcotic, Drunk Driving, Intoxication Report: A narcotic, drunk driving, or intoxication report is used to describe the suspect's condition of being under the influence of a drug or alcohol. Most often, these are separate reports and written in conjunction with a crime report.

Officer's Activity Report or Daily Log: The activity report or daily log is commonly used to provide an agency with statistical information regarding the activity on an officer's shift. These reports include the calls the officer responded to, the disposition of the call, the amount of time spent on the call, and other activities within the shift such as car stops, number of citations written, etc. Some agencies obtain the same information via a computer terminal in the officer's vehicle.

Supplemental Report: A supplemental report is typically written by an officer other than the original reporting officer. For instance, an officer may assist a fellow officer in an investigation by interviewing people or by recovering property. The assisting officer would write a Supplemental Report to document his or her actions.

Traffic Collision Report: A traffic collision report provides information regarding traffic collisions. Such reports typically include statements of drivers and witnesses, diagrams, and photographs.

Traffic Citations: Given when a traffic or parking violation has occurred. They are pre-printed forms.