



Principles of Investigative Report Writing



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Principles of Investigative Report Writing



A criminal investigation is only as good as the report that supports it.

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Quality

"The best investigation is only as good as the report completed about it. A quality report is an effective report, and to qualify as effective it must be:

- Complete
- Clear
- Concise
- Accurate"

■ Police Magazine, May 1997

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Basics of Report Writing Skills

- Write in the first person.
- Use chronological order.
- Use past tense.
- Use active voice.
- Use correct spelling and punctuation.
- Use correct subject/verb agreement.
- Use correct pronoun reference.
- Avoid jargon and wordiness.
- Write facts rather than opinions.
- Choose the correct word to describe the incident.
- Organize the report by using openings, paragraphs, and headings.

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Note Taking

- Purpose:
 - Record storage
 - Building Blocks
 - Aid to Memory
- Mechanics of Note Taking
 - Readable
 - Accurate
 - Concise

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Notes to Sentences

- 0700 rec'd call, 459 now, 123 N. Main Street.
- 0710 arrvd scene
- 0711 RP R. Foster (3-16-59) arrvd busins, 0645, frnt door open.

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Sentences to Reports

On February 6, 2005, I was assigned to uniformed patrol, unit 1A12. At 0700 hours, I received a call of a burglary in progress at 123 North Main Street.

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Reports

Source of Activity:

On February 6, 2005, I was assigned to uniformed patrol, unit 1A12. At 0700 hours, I received a call of a burglary in progress at 123 North Main Street.

Observations:

At 0710 hours, I arrived on scene where I was met by the Reporting Party, Raymond Foster. Foster told me that he arrived at his place of business (123 N. Main Street) at 0645 hours and found the front door of the business open.

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Tell the Story

What happened?

Create a mental picture so the reader knows what you know.

The reader:

Supervisor	Detectives	Victim
District Attorney	Witnesses	Judge
Defense Attorney	Cold case years later	

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Write in First Person

- To make reports easier to read and to understand, investigators should write in the FIRST PERSON.
- The writer of the report refers to himself/herself as *I*, and uses the first person pronouns *me*, *my*, and *mine*.

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Missing Information

Missing information can be used to infer that you are:

- Not very professional
- Not Thorough
- Do not have certain expertise
- Not Truthful

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Write in Chronological Order

- Chronological order is order by time. Your report should tell what happened in the order that the events took place.
- Get all the facts and then list them in the order in which they happened. It is much easier to understand what happened if the details are written in chronological order, even if the people involved do not *tell* you the information in chronological order.

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Write in the Past Tense

- Everything you write in your report has already happened, so use the past tense.
 - In present tense, you would write: **The suspect lives at 1010 Swanson Court.** A defense attorney might ask: "Does the suspect still live there?" It's likely you will have to say that you do not know. If you have to say, "I don't know" many times, you will destroy your credibility. If you write in past tense, you can say that what is in the report was correct at the time you wrote the report.

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Past Tense

- Do not** use the emphatic form (the word *did*) in combination with other action words (verbs). This form implies that something else happened.
 - Incorrect:** I did issue a citation. (But it was ignored.)
 - Correct:** I issued a citation.
 - Incorrect:** Markly did say that Norman had a gun. (But later he changed his statement.)
 - Correct:** Markly said that Norman had a gun.

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Spelling and Punctuation

Basic Principle:

Spelling always counts!

Avoid looking –

Stupid

Careless

Unprofessional

Uneducated

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Use an Active Voice

- Every sentence has a subject and a verb.
 - Active Voice:** When the subject performs the action of the verb.
 - Active voice: I asked the man about the broken mirror.
 - Passive Voice:** When the action is done to the subject. The subject receives the action of the verb.
 - Passive voice: The fire was reported by the child.
- Reports should be written in active voice whenever possible.

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Use Active Voice

- The report was written by Officer Jackson.
 - Passive voice
 - Seven words
- Officer Jackson wrote the report.
 - Active voice
 - Five words
 - If you save two words per sentence, in a five paragraph report, you will save approximately 40 words.

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Subject/Verb Agreement

- Singular (He/ She)
 - Is
 - Was
 - Has
 - Does
 - Knows
 - Wants
- Plural (They)
 - Are
 - Were
 - Have
 - Do
 - Know
 - Want

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Subject/Verb Agreement

- Certain subjects look like they are plural when they are really singular. The words *each*, *either*, *neither* and any word that ends in -one, -body, or -thing are singular.
 - Anyone Anybody Anything
 - No one Nobody Nothing
 - Everyone Everybody Everything
 - Someone Somebody Something

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What is Jargon?

And, why should we avoid it?

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Avoid Wordiness

- Good police reports can avoid wordiness by doing the following:
 - Use simple words
 - Use active voice
 - Avoid wordy phrases
 - Avoid redundancy

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Examples

- **Incorrect:** In subsequent endeavors to ascertain her whereabouts on July 28, I questioned the suspected perpetrator as she exited the premises of her employment.
- **Correct:** I later questioned the suspect as she left work to learn where she had been on July 28.

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Avoid Wordy Phrases

■ Each and every	■ Each
■ Red in color	■ Red
■ Due to the fact that	■ Because
■ If this should prove to be the case	■ If
■ Paced back and forth	■ Paced
■ Members of the gang	■ Gang members

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Avoid Redundancy

■ Past experience	■ Experience
■ True facts	■ Facts
■ Future plans	■ Plans
■ Meet together	■ Meet
■ Reduce down	■ Reduce
■ Final result	■ The result
■ Join together	■ Join
■ Basic fundamentals	■ Basic/ fundamental

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Report Facts, Not Opinions

- **How do you know?**
 - See
 - Hear
 - Taste
 - Touch
 - Smell

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Report Facts, Not Opinions

- Report facts, not your opinions.
 - **Opinion:** Peterson is a violent person.
 - **Fact:** Peterson has been arrested twice for domestic abuse.
- Be sure to cite the source of your information.
 - **The victim entered the garage at approximately 2311 hours. (How do you know? Were you there?)**
 - **The victim said she entered the garage at approximately 2311 hours.**

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Use Specific Words

- Accuracy involves detail, so be sure your sentences are specific enough to give the reader a clear picture.
 - The suspect was driving recklessly.
 - The suspect did not stop the vehicle before it struck the child on the sled.

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Attitude Toward Reports

- Defense Attorney:
 - **"If it isn't on paper, it didn't happen."**
 - Defense attorneys always check to see who was the arresting officer. Every officer earns a reputation for the quality of reports that he or she writes.

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Attitudes Toward Reports

- Juries:
 - **"If I don't hear it in court, it didn't happen."**
 - If something is not in the report, it is harder to bring up in court. If you testify about information but it's not in the report, you've lost credibility. There is no good answer to the question, "Why isn't it in the report?"
 - On the witness stand, if an officer can't remember but says that the information is in the report, the jury usually believes the report.

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Writing a Report

- Once your notes are in order, write the narrative. Each narrative will have
 - An opening or **Source of Activity**
 - Chronological facts of the investigation or **Observations**
 - A closing or disposition

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Writing a Report

- The opening will contain
 - Who the officer(s) and complainant(s) are
 - What the officer was doing at the time of the call
 - What the incident was
 - When (time and date) the officer received the call
 - Where the incident occurred

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Writing a Report

- A typical opening, with heading, may read as follows:
Source of Activity:
 On Tuesday, March 18, 200-, I was on patrol alone. At approximately 1042 hours, Dispatch called and said that a Henry Bartell had reported a battery in progress outside Katy's Café, 123 Main Street.

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Writing a Report

- The chronological narration of the incident should outline what you did to investigate the incident.
- Use headings to keep your report organized. Exact headings will depend on the type of incident that you are investigating.

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Writing a Report

- Headings may include:
 - Source of Activity
 - Observations
 - Victim's Statements
 - Witness' Statements
 - Officer's Actions
 - Suspect's Statements
 - Description of Stolen Goods
 - Evidence
 - Disposition
 - Arrests
 - Citations
 - Juvenile Custody
 - Status


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Writing a Report

- Under each heading use one or more paragraphs. Use a new paragraph to signal
 - A shift in focus
 - New perspective/ viewpoint
 - New topic or idea within a topic
 - A change of time
 - A change of location
 - A new person or speaker
 - Set off dialogue
 - A new section of the report
- Paragraphs may include numbered or bulleted list

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Summary



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