

# How to write organized and concise police reports

Set the scene, by introducing the people, property and other information before it is discussed

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## Editor's Note

The information and methods in this article are more fully discussed in John Bowden's excellent book "*Report Writing For Law Enforcement & Corrections.*" It is available from the Amazon and other booksellers.

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What is the secret to good police report writing? The answer is organization and clarity. By following these two principles, you're already on the path to a great report. A major problem for a lot of report writers is organization, not writing the report in chronological order.

One of the biggest challenges with the concept of chronological order is the order according to whom? Is it the writer, the victim, a witness or perhaps even the suspect? Each of these actors in the event has their own perspective to the order of events.

## WHERE SHOULD I BEGIN THE POLICE REPORT?

For the writer, the incident starts when they first arrive on the scene. For the victim, it is when they first realize they are the victim. For the witness, it is when they first see the action that makes them a witness. Of course, for the suspect, it is when they make that conscious decision to commit the crime. True chronological order means the order in which the events actually occurred.

### **Many reports begin this way:**

While on patrol, (date and time) I received a call to (location). Upon my arrival, I spoke to the victim, (name) who said...

This format is told in the order in which the events occurred to the writer. It can work and has worked since report writing began, in simple cases with few principals, facts and evidence. In these cases, it is easy to use and can be understood fairly well.

The problems in clarity occur when there are multiple principals, a significant amount of evidence and events occurred over a longer time period of time. You know you're having problems in organizing the report when it's unclear where or how to begin the report.

### **TELL THE INCIDENT STORY BACKWARD**

This format is not what I would call a report. It is a statement from the writer saying what happened to them. In fact, in most cases, the crime has already occurred, and the writer is telling the story backward. When asked why they write this way, many report writers will state that they don't want to make it look like they are making it up — they want to emphasize where they received the information.

I have a simple startup paragraph that relieves this concern and makes it clear where the information came from:

I, (name), on (date and time) received a call to (location) reference to (the crime). My investigation revealed the following information.

This one short paragraph is interpreted to mean you talked to all the parties involved and examined the evidence. A report is not a statement of what the writer did (although this format can more or less work). A report tells the story of what happened, based on the investigation. Some writers are concerned about being required to testify about what the report revealed. This is not a concern. You only testify to what you did, heard or saw.

When a witness tells you what they saw, you cannot testify to those facts, only that they said it to you. Their information should be thoroughly documented in their own written statements. Each witness, victim or suspect will testify to their own part in the case. Crime scene technicians and experts will testify to the evidence and how it relates to the case.

Your story, told in true chronological order, will be the guide to the prosecutor of what happened. It is like the outlines in a coloring book. The prosecutor will add the color with his presentation, using all the subjects and experts as his crayons to illustrate the picture — the story. The investigating officer that writes the report is one of those crayons.

### **SET THE SCENE**

We start the process with the opening statement I outlined above. You can change the verbiage to suit your own style. The important phrase is the last sentence, "My investigation revealed the following information." This tells the reader that this is the story of what happened. Your actions will be inserted in the story as it unfolds.

When you start, set the scene. Introduce the people, property and other information before it is discussed. For example, with a convenience store robbery, set the time, location and victim before you describe the action.

Mr. Jones was working as a store clerk on Jan 12th, 2013, at the Mid-Town Convenience store, 2501 E. Maple Street, at 2315 hours. Jones was standing behind the counter, facing the store. There were no other people in the store.

These first few sentences set the scene. The next sentence is the next thing that happens.

Approximately 2020 hours the suspect walked in the front door.

Each of the following sentences is merely a statement of what happened next.

- The suspect walked around the store in a counterclockwise direction.
- When he emerged from the back of the store he was wearing a stocking mask.
- He walked up to the counter and pointed a small revolver at the clerk.
- He said, "Give me all the money in the register..."

If you have multiple subjects involved in the event, introduce and place them all at the same time, before starting the action. A good example of this is a shoplifting case with multiple suspects and multiple loss prevention officers. Before starting the action, place all the people. This makes it easy to describe the action when it starts.

After you finish telling the story, you can add all the facts that need to be included in the report not brought out in the story. Here are facts that can be included, if available:

- Evidence collected
- Pictures taken
- Statements of witnesses, the victim and even the suspect.
- Property recovered
- Any facts needed to be documented in the case
- Using this process will ensure your police report is clear and complete.

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#### **About the author**

John Bowden is the founder and director of Applied Police Training and Certification. John retired from the Orlando Police Department as a Master Police Officer In 1994. His career spans a period of 21 years in law enforcement overlapping 25 years of law enforcement instruction. His total of more than 37 years of experience includes all aspects of law enforcement to include: uniform crime scene technician, patrol operations, investigations, undercover operations, planning and research for departmental development, academy coordinator, field training officer and field training supervisor.