

Plain English for Cops

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*Without the support and encouragement of our families,
we could not have completed this book. We dedicate it to them:
Julia, Kathleen, Betsy, Kat, Hannah, and Molly.*

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Foreword

The Importance of Police Report Writing Skills

Isaiah McKinnon, Ph.D.
Chief of Police (Ret.), City of Detroit

When we think about the types of skills police officers need in order to perform their jobs well, we usually think in terms of defensive tactics, proficiency in the use of firearms, and pursuit driving. Often, we overlook the importance of developing the skills associated with preparing high quality police reports. The ability to prepare an accurate and concise police report is a basic but crucial aspect of a police officer's job. Report writing is a constant fact of life for law enforcement. Reports, memos, updates, evaluations—all of these and more have to be written to drive the information machine that is law enforcement.

Unfortunately, a great deal of law enforcement writing is mired in stilted language, unclear reporting, inconsistencies and mistakes, jargon and inappropriate word choice. This directly impacts how the justice system works. Dependent on information, the justice system will run more efficiently and effectively when law enforcement reports are clear, concise, and accurate. Due to the importance of writing in the American justice system, it is vital that law enforcement writing is upgraded so that reports help, instead of hinder, the system.

Well-written reports make everyone's job easier. The police supervisor is satisfied that everything is accounted for and doesn't need more information. The prosecutor who reads the report understands everything and doesn't have to conduct additional interviews.

Without a doubt, we as professional police officers are morally obligated to provide the public with the best possible police service. The wheels of justice spin more smoothly when police reports are written accurately, clearly, and concisely.

Preface

Police report writing has often been compared to having a root canal done without the benefit of Novocain™. This book is the Novocain™. While we can't make you love to write reports, we can make writing a good report far less painful. From patrol officers to chiefs, report writing is a common lament with each level of the hierarchy having its own perspective. The patrol officer may sincerely believe that most of the reports she authors will go nowhere but the file and acts accordingly. The chief, on the other hand, may see these reports as the basis for planning, staffing, budgeting, or the first line of defense against complaints lodged against the officer or the department. No matter what your perspective, do not underestimate the importance of report writing to your profession. We think Steven Walker, a parole supervisor for the Michigan Department of Corrections, said it best: **“It’s more than writing; it’s making things work.”**

One of the major advantages of our book is its simplicity. This book, unlike most of the textbooks available for police report writing, is reality based. We recognize that report formats* vary from agency to agency. Rather than focus on the report formats of any one or two departments, we will provide generic elements of report design as we concentrate on conveying information in an honest, clear, concise, and complete manner. This book will assist the writer of any police communication in understanding the importance of clear writing from a global perspective, not just from the limited point of view of any single department or officer. We purposely avoid lengthy discussions of report formats since we recognize that each department has its own preferences, and therefore

*Throughout this book, we use the word **report** to mean any document written by a member of a law enforcement agency. Reports include, but are not limited to, field reports. The techniques and concepts that allow you to produce a well-written field report will allow you to produce well-written memos, budget reports, leave requests, requests for transfers and any other professional document you may be called upon to write. We use the word **format** to refer to the physical arrangement of the report on the page, how it looks on paper.

an attempt to address each department's style would be futile. Use of your local agency's forms and formats in completing the exercises provided is encouraged.

We have attempted to organize this book into broad, and we hope somewhat humorous, themes based on our analysis of hundreds of police reports from departments ranging in size from three to one-thousand employees. We are convinced that police writers continue to make basic mistakes that can have a devastating effect on their credibility and that of their department. These common, relatively simple errors seem to be universal in police writing. You will learn from the mistakes of others, and this knowledge can be applied to your writing in the field.

This is not an ivory tower book. All examples are real; none were fabricated from our positions as "chairborne rangers." Only the identifying information has been changed at the request of the departments who cooperated in this project. We avoided using examples from high-profile, media-sensationalized cases because the focus should be on the writing, not the case. Instead, we focused on the work of the typical officer—the world of routine, mundane, day-to-day documentation. As you read and work through the examples, keep in mind that most were approved by at least one supervisor and, in many cases, by others in the chain of command.

This book was originally planned for use as a primary textbook in a college course or police academy. As it evolved, we became convinced that it is also useful as a tool for Field Training Officers in preparing the new officer for independence and for supervisors in remediating officers who are having difficulty with written communication. It can also be used as part of a comprehensive inservice training program.

Officers often feel that their reports go nowhere and are read by no one. A unique aspect of this book is the inclusion of focus boxes which we have titled "From the" Contributors to these focus boxes are representative of the many professionals who depend on quality reports to do their jobs. You will learn to appreciate the importance of your documentation from the insights of criminal justice professionals: prosecutors, chiefs, supervisors, defense attorneys, the news media, and others.

Even the most poorly written police report can be transformed if the officer keeps a few basic concepts in mind. It's usually a simple fix. To that end, we will focus on the KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) method.

To the Instructor

Typically police skills are not taught by demonstrating incorrect methods. For example, you do not demonstrate improper baton use by simulating striking the suspect over the head and urging your students not to do so. In a stressful situation, the officer will resort to the most dramatic examples that she learned during training. Thus, we demonstrate only the correct way to use a baton. However, using examples of mistakes in the report writing process and the corresponding humor found in these mistakes can create memory pegs that the officer can remember and apply when she is writing her report.

We have to face the reality that most officers did not enter law enforcement because of their love for report writing. If you are using this text in the basic training/college setting, we suspect your students, while interested in the topic, really can't wait to get into the "real" police training. If you are teaching an inservice training program, be prepared for empty front rows, full back rows, lots of eye rolling, contemplation of the ceiling, and other signs of interest. If you are working with an officer who has been sent to you for individual remediation, be prepared for resistance. In each case, YOU are going to have to generate interest. We have found there are some ways to do that. First and foremost, DON'T teach a traditional grammar class. Don't lecture on nouns, future perfect verbs, and modal auxiliaries. Use examples from local police agencies. If you are teaching an inservice, use copies of your departmental reports as a tool to get your officers to buy into the training as our first Focus Box clearly illustrates.

From the Assistant Prosecutor*

I recently trained all road officers and supervising sergeants in the Lansing Police Department regarding domestic assault report

* Alice Phillips is an Assistant Prosecuting Attorney with Ingham County, Michigan. She specializes in domestic violence cases.

writing techniques. A mock domestic assault scene was staged, and two officers were asked to interview the witnesses. All officers were then asked what they would list in their report (based on the statements provided) and what the Prosecutor would need to successfully prosecute the case. After hearing their comments, the officers were provided with three well-written domestic assault police reports and three poorly written domestic assault reports (these were retyped and names/addresses changed). The officers were broken into groups of six (with each group covering one report) and were asked to present the good and bad points of the report to the class (focusing primarily on whether the statutory requirements were met). The officers evaluating the three poorly written reports were astonished that such reports existed. When I held up the actual reports and indicated the reports had been produced by three of their fellow officers, they were appalled. They clearly understood at that point the importance of each police report in proceeding with victimless prosecution in domestic assault situations.

We have selected examples for both their humor and tragedy. We have specifically omitted any answer keys since there is no one correct way to write or rewrite the exercises. Agencies differ in their approaches; therefore, we encourage you to complete the exercises yourself. This will allow you to tailor your answers to your jurisdiction and your teaching to your audience, i.e., academy, inservice, trainee, etc. Convey to your students that report writing is more than just slot-filling. Have them struggle with the answers. The only way to write well is by writing again, and again, and again. Encourage the use of small group work, moot court exercises, and peer evaluations. Take the sample reports provided and have students rewrite each report based on the information given. Compare what each student writes to see the wide variety of factual interpretations. You can also use your own “uglies” (a term we use to refer to reports that are worse than bad) as a basis for training.

Throughout this book we dismiss certain rules of grammar, offer some broad generalizations, avoid discussions of some of the more technical aspects of writing, and in general play a little fast and loose with the ele-

ments of style. We are sure that you will be able to find exceptions to the rules we offer here. So can we.

A technical table of contents is included at the end of this book for those of you who want to know where traditional grammar concepts fit into each chapter. For those of you who wish to make a detailed analysis of the exceptions, modifications, etc., feel free to refer to Quirk and Greenbaum's treatise. But remember, our purpose is not to burden the officer with a traditional grammar text, rather it is to provide the officer with a roadmap to aid in the preparation of documents that are clear and complete.

To the Officer

We use the term officer throughout this book. If you are a student beginning your career in law enforcement, we want you to think of yourself not as a student, but as a police officer. We want you to approach report writing as you would any other aspect of your training: survival. The impact of a poorly written report can be as devastating as taking a bullet. Either can end your career. If you are an experienced officer who has been selected as a person who can benefit from this book — take heart! You will be able to relate to most of our examples because you have been there. Use the experiences of your fellow officers from around the country and improve your own abilities.

We use the *Mary Poppins* approach to police writing: humor is our spoonful of sugar. Just as fire arms, driving, defensive tactics, investigative skills, and patrol tactics improve with practice and experience, so will your report writing. You might actually come to enjoy the challenge of completing a report that you will be proud of. You will become known by your reports. Poor reports, poor reputation; great reports, great reputation.

From the FTO Supervisor*

Seventeen years ago, as a wide-eyed rookie, I was treated to a lesson about the importance of report writing by a veteran police officer at the same time as a group of elementary school students. This lesson occurred at a career day at a local elementary school. The veteran officer asked the children what the most important tool was for a police officer. We heard many of the responses that I myself was thinking: gun, handcuffs, and police car. To each and every answer the veteran officer replied, “No” until the

*Sgt. Paul Erlandson is with the Township of Kalamazoo (MI) Police Department. He is an expert in traffic accident reconstruction.

answers dried up. The officer then reached into his pocket, pulled out a pen, and told the students that the pen was absolutely the most important tool for a police officer. He explained to the students how the pen was most important to the police officer for report writing.

Seventeen years later, that tool may have changed to a tape recorder, personal computer, or laptop computer, but the end result is no less important today. As a sergeant and Field Training Supervisor, I review a multitude of police reports, directives, memos, and teletypes. There is nothing that will cause more consternation, joke making at the expense of the author, or just plain incredulity than a poorly written document. As police officers, we are judged most often by the written report or the memo.

I have told many trainees and veteran officers that the greatest job can be undermined by a poorly written report. Using clichés and stilted phrases, failing to include the necessary elements, and failing to use proper grammar reduce the most impressive job to a poor piece of work. A well-written report will save you from unnecessary court time and from civil suits. We must learn to write clearly, concisely, and properly. I have seen many highly talented applicants not be considered further for employment because of their inability to write. I have also seen many highly talented veteran officers be joked about or fail to get an arrest warrant issued because of a poorly written report. As police officers we have to be able to express ourselves by the written word.

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