



RISK MANAGEMENT INFORMATION TO PROTECT, SERVE, AND DOCUMENT

**This information was originally developed in conjunction with the League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust's PATROL program (Police Accredited TRaining OnLine). For information on PATROL, contact Laura Honeck at patrol@lmc.org or 651-281-1280. For questions about the material in this memo, contact Ann Gergen at agergen@lmc.org or 651-281-1291.*

Introduction:

Officers are constantly reminded about the importance of report writing. While these reminders may get tiring, there is no getting around the fact that report writing is a core job function for peace officers. In fact, studies indicate that officers routinely spend up to 25% or more of their shift writing reports.¹

Police reports play a crucial role in the criminal justice system. Almost all arrests and prosecutions stem from information initially documented in a police report. Prosecutors, judges, and other actors in the criminal justice system rely on police reports to lay a foundation for taking action.

Most police reports end up in the public domain. Therefore, officers have no idea how many people may end up reading their reports when they sit down to write them. The report may never be read by anyone outside of the department. On the other hand, it is also possible that the report will be read by defense attorneys, probation officers, the media, or a host of other people.

Because of the wide variety of potential readers, officers have a personal stake in the quality of their reports. Just as a well-written report implies that an officer is knowledgeable and has good investigative skills, a poorly-written report implies a sloppy approach to police work. Officers who are great report writers are often highly regarded by detectives, supervisors, prosecutors, and judges.

Writing tips:

To ensure that their police reports are informative and professional, officers should consider the following writing tips:

¹ See www.copsreportsfromthefield.org/reports/MN-MORE-Champlin.pdf

This material is provided as general information and is not a substitute for legal advice.
Consult your attorney for advice concerning specific situations.

Remember your audience. The potential reach of a police report is broad and includes people that are not police officers. Even if the reader works in the criminal justice system, he or she may not be aware of basic police procedures. Therefore, the best way for officers to tell the story is in simple, common language.

Avoid slang and police jargon. A good report makes sparing use of slang and other professional jargon. While other officers may read and understand a report filled with police jargon, a judge or probation officer may not. Using jargon can cause an unfamiliar reader to have to decode a report.

Be technical only when it's necessary. Law enforcement professionals often portray an easy-to-understand event as something very technical. This results in clumsy sentences that are hard for the reader to process. For example, consider the sentence, "I approached the suspect vehicle and upon making verbal contact with the driver requested that he produce his driver's license." The sentence is awkward and may take the reader an extra reading or two to figure out its meaning. Instead, officers should write, "I walked up to the car and asked the driver for his license." The same meaning is conveyed in a much shorter sentence that is easier for the reader to understand.

There is, however, a time for technical writing. For example, if an officer needs to describe where he or she collected a crucial piece of evidence in a murder investigation, the writer should be focused on the evidence and not the shortest way to convey the idea. It may also be necessary for officers to add some context to terms of art. For example, a lay person may not know what it means to use a Taser in the drive-stun mode, but a report should leave the reader feeling that a weapon was used and its use was justified.

The bottom line is that officers need to be able to distinguish between unnecessary jargon, and necessary terms of art.

Don't be conclusory. Words like "belligerent" "resisted arrest" or "combative" state conclusions without factual support. These words should only be used in a topic sentence followed by narrative information that describes the activity.

Clarity and brevity – The goal is to write a report that is complete, organized, and gets to the point. Events should be presented in chronological order using simple common language. There is no need to impress the reader with big words. A person of average intelligence should be able to read a police report without looking up the words in a dictionary. Additionally, officers should only include relevant information, so time and space is used more efficiently.

Officers should also consider using bullet points to achieve clarity and efficiency in their report writing. Bullet points give officers the ability to present a sequence of events or observations without worrying how to link sentences together.

Writing Mechanics:

An effective police report must be easy to read and display at least a basic command of the English language.

Write in the first person. The reader should be put behind the eyeballs of the reporting officer so they can take in the information as the officer did. Therefore, “my partner and I spoke to several witnesses,” is better than “the officer and his partner spoke to several witnesses.

Write in the active voice. Sentences written in active voice tend to be shorter and are easier for the reader to understand. “I read the suspect his Miranda rights,” is preferable to “the suspect was read his Miranda rights by me.”

Write in the past tense. Police reports are written about events that have already taken place. Using the present tense can confuse the reader.

Be careful with pronouns and general language. The reader should not be confused about who or what the police report is discussing. He, she, his, her, it, and other pronouns can confuse the reader when multiple people or things are involved. An excessive amount of pronouns can cause the reader to lose focus and re-read a portion of your report to in order to figure out who you are writing about. Also, using specific language conveys the story better than generalities.

Proofread and spell check. Officers should re-read their report to ensure that the idea they are conveying is understood. Officers shouldn’t hesitate to ask another officer to review their reports and should always use spell check.

Ethical Considerations:

A good police report documents all evidence that is relevant to the defendant’s guilt or innocence of a crime. Officers have an obligation to include both inculpatory and exculpatory evidence. In fact, the U.S. Supreme Court has held that withholding material evidence pointing to a suspect’s innocence is a constitutional violation.² Additionally, the P.O.S.T. Board’s statewide model policy on conduct unbecoming a peace officer provides, “peace officers shall truthfully, completely, and impartially report, testify and present evidence, including exculpatory evidence, in all matters of an official nature.”³

SPARED Method:

To ensure that a police report is complete and contains all the necessary information, peace officers should consider following the SPARED method when you write your reports.

² *Brady v. Maryland*, 373 U.S. 83 (1963).

³ SEE MINN. STAT. § 626. 8457 (2006) (PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT OF PEACE OFFICERS MODEL POLICY).

S – Stage. Set the stage for the reader. Include the location, time and type of the call, and how you became involved in the incident.

P – Parties. Identify and describe who the involved parties are, including suspects, witnesses, victims, and participating officers. If physical characteristics matter, describe them.

A – Actions. This is the meat of the report. If you were part of the action, tell the story in chronological order. If you were investigating something that had already happened, provide the information in the order you gathered it.

R – Reasons. State your reason for each action you took that bumped up against a citizen's constitutional rights.

E – Evidence. Identify and describe any evidence you collected.

D – Disposition. Tell how the story ended, especially where the people and things involved ended up.

Conclusion:

Police reports are enormously important to the criminal justice system. Detectives, prosecutors, and others rely on police reports to make decisions in criminal investigations and prosecutions. Because police reports can be read by so many people, officers should strive to make them as effective as possible. Following the writing tips and method in this course will help officers apply basic writing rules to their reports so their reports are organized and more effective.

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