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INVESTIGATIVE  
REPORT WRITING

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DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE  
CRIMINAL JUSTICE  
SPECIAL INVESTIGATION DIVISION

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OREGON DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

ACQUISITIONS

INVESTIGATIVE REPORT WRITING

I. REPORTS

The term "report" comes from a Latin word meaning "to carry or bring back". Such essentially is the purpose of report writing in law enforcement.

It can be assumed that three factors exist in every report:

- (1) The writer of the report has acquired knowledge of some incident or criminal offense;
- (2) The writer has something material to say regarding it; and
- (3) The information reported is essential to the disposition of the incident or offense.

Reports must contain not just words but "word pictures". Hence, the most important item in reporting is very simply, language. Vocabulary is in fact the film upon which the picture of observations is developed. Investigators who possess a good working vocabulary have a distinct advantage in report writing.

In developing reporting techniques, an investigator will find that knowledge of good English is indispensable. Not only must the writer acquire proficiency in spelling and vocabulary, but further he must also have a firm understanding of the basic principles of grammar, punctuation and sentence structure. To

this end, he must take it upon himself to stay well versed and proficient in this area.

It should be remembered that reports are read and reviewed by superiors and by many other persons, agencies and organizations. If word usage is sloppy or ambiguous, misinterpretations may result; and valuable time will be lost in clarifying doubtful points. An investigator who hopes to accomplish good report writing must constantly bear in mind this responsibility. He must think of himself as a human camera upon which his agency is completely dependent in recording investigative impressions.

Reports are valuable to three basic groups:

(1) The Public

The public having delegated police powers to law enforcement agencies expect to receive definite protective services among which is the benefit of an accurate reporting system.

In civil cases for example, the average person needs some means of verifying incidents in which he may have been involved. There must exist, in other words, an impartial record of facts concerning him.

Good reporting also serves as a vehicle for prosecuting people accused of crimes and of clearing those who have been falsely accused. If reports fulfill no other useful purpose, the latter point alone would make them invaluable.

(2) The Individual Investigator

During the course of each investigation, an investigator is confronted with complicated situations. Since memory is at best an unstable faculty, out of sheer self-defense the investigator must find some means of permanently recording his observations. This task is best accomplished by utilizing a standardized report form.

It often seems that no other public official is in the spotlight so much as the law enforcement officer. Every act he performs, every statement he makes can conceivably be followed by criticism, damage suits or worse. It is unfortunate, of course, that police mistakes are given such widespread publicity. Very seldom does the press laud their accomplishments. The point to bear in mind is that factual, honest, and hopefully articulate reporting is the most dependable tool which can be utilized by an investigator.

(3) Agencies

The value of reports to an agency certainly goes without comment. The division head cannot personally oversee the activities of each member of his organization. Certainly he cannot be with several different investigators at the same time. The only method by which he can evaluate the status of current investigations is by studying the reports received from individual investigators.

Each division is accountable to the agency head for their particular area of responsibility. They must be able to accurately show what problems exist and what is being done to cope with and correct them. This is accomplished by means of reports.

Continuous planning based on reports received furnishes a guide for further action. Reports will show when more men, material and equipment are necessary and justified. Beyond this they will enable an agency to inform the public of the success or failure of community planning and what additional aid may be required. It is not enough to do a good job. The public must be made aware of the effort.

PREPARATION

Few people can sit down and without previous thought or planning dash off a top-notch report. There is much more to report writing than the simple, physical act of filling a page with words.

The first step the writer must take is to assemble

all the notes he has made about the incident in question. From previous experience he will know that a report without good notes lacks validity. There must be a foundation upon which to build. Often the investigator will find in a complex and prolonged investigation, the task of assembling notes can be very tedious. A good finished product, however, will more than compensate him for his efforts.

Everything an investigator does involves some degree of planning, either formal or informal. This is especially true in report writing. To begin with, he must construct an outline to serve as a blueprint for the projected report. Such an outline will give him confidence; and, as he works to complete it, he will be pleased to see his report grow and take shape in a strong and logical manner. Even though he may feel sometimes that an outline is not necessary in every report, he will discover as time progresses that just the opposite is true. Outlining always makes reporting easier.

After gathering the notes and preparing an outline, the investigator must check references to confirm and support the material incorporated in the report. Needless to say, the first source he must check is the statute which defines the particular offense at issue. The investigator's primary obligation is to demonstrate conclusively that a crime has in fact been committed; and the facts exist to establish the various elements of the crime.

The true test of a good report is whether it clearly imparts to the reader the observations and facts discovered by

the writer. This means that it must contain a minimum of grammatical errors and that sentence structure, punctuation and paragraphing must be effective.

#### FORMAT

The investigator must now depend on another basic reporting tool, a format. This is the point that advance preparation starts to justify itself for the picture begins to take a definite shape.

A format is best defined as a standard sequence for specific information. And most agencies find that by establishing a format in reporting, it makes reporting easier for the writer and easier for the person who evaluates it. In the case of the narrative report, most formats follow these steps:

##### (1) Person(s) Contacted

Before any details of an incident are introduced, the writer must list the names of all persons involved as victims, suspects, witnesses, informants, or complainants. Also included should be the race, sex, age, residence, and business address and residence and business address telephone numbers of each person. Information of this sort serves two purposes:

- (a) The reader does not have to sift the total reports to get individual names and/or addresses; and
- (b) Production of file cards for the records system is expedited.
- (c) Example: John James JONES, WMA, DOB: 1-15-41  
Residence: 1111 Southwest Washburn Lane  
Portland, Oregon 97221, 292-6161  
Business: 600 Southwest 4th Avenue  
Portland, Oregon 97204, 224-6265

##### (2) Initial Summary

At the onset of a narrative report, the person evaluating the report should be furnished a quick summation of why the report was written. In this introduction or summary, the writer should clearly set forth exactly what subject is to be covered and why. This will assist the reader in gaining a preliminary mental outline of the information from onset to present.

(3) Body of the Report

In the body, the writer should relate to others his observations and discoveries. Listed below are some point suggestions that will make it easier for him to produce a professional work product:

- (a) The facts must be related in an orderly and chronological manner. Using an outline will make this possible.
- (b) The writer should proceed from the known to the unknown, presenting the facts on the basis of observation, accumulated evidence and personal statements. Extreme care must be taken not to mix facts and speculation in this area of the report. As trite as this may sound, to tell a complete story, the officer must answer the following questions:

WHO - was involved as a victim, suspect, witness or informant?

WHAT - occurred? (Should be presented in a chronological sequence, listing such factors as evidence, property, how crime discovered, etc.)

WHERE - did the described event occur? (Location or premises description.)

WHEN - did the events occur? (If possible, exact date and time of day.)

WHY - did the incident occur? (Motive is helpful in determining intent and aids in the identification of the perpetrator; this phase also helps to determine if a crime is in fact at issue.)

HOW - was the incident committed? (Tools, weapons, or physical acts or omissions.)

- (c) Separate paragraphs should be used for each action step. A report paragraph must not only focus attention on a particular fact, it must hold the attention of the reader until discussion of the fact is complete. Proper paragraphing is designed to provide moments of rest for the reader (particularly in long reports) so as to keep his attention for longer periods of time.



- (d) Care must be taken to avoid superfluous information. Only that which is pertinent and significant to the situation should be included in the report. Avoid interjecting opinions when they are not material to the ultimate conclusion.
- (e) The investigator should write as he speaks. If he should try to be literary, the chances are that it will sound stilted and phony. A report is judged on its merits as an instrument of recording facts not as a work of prose. Certainly there are occasions when it is correct and also imperative to use uncommon or technical language. When this is necessary, however, the investigator must be sure that he knows precisely what he is writing about.

(4) Narrative Captions and Form

All reports written as a synopsis of a statement by a person should contain only information gained from one individual. With the exception of the initial summation or a final overview report, this rule must be strictly adhered to. The purpose is of course to aid the prosecutor in case preparation for trial. This allows the prosecuting attorney to have immediate access to the statement of a single witness without having to read the statements of several other persons.

The narrative report should begin with the case or file number, the particular statute involved, the complainant, the suspect, a list of the persons contacted, a summary, a report of investigation, conclusions and recommendations. Some of the captions most commonly used are as follows:

Date	Person(s) contacted,
Subject	(W), (V), (S) and (I)--
File or Case Number	address, phone number,
Statute Involved	date, time and place contacted
Complainant	
Suspect	W - Witness; V - Victim
Evidence	S - Suspect; I - Informant
Documents	
Photographs	Agency contacted--state,
Summary	county, federal--date, time,
Background	person contacted, place
Investigation	
Conclusions	Law enforcement agency
Recommendations	contacted--date, time,
	person contacted, place

Again, the above is listing only some of the more frequently used captions which, depending on the situation, can be altered as needed.

(5) The Conclusion

As complete a picture as possible should be left in the minds of those reading and evaluating a report. To satisfactorily accomplish this, a writer must show the disposition of all persons, evidence and property. All appropriate details should be specified, and no items or persons may be unaccounted for.

Lastly, the investigator should indicate what leads need to be followed up and what loose ends he could not resolve and why. By so indicating he will reduce the possibility of duplication of effort. Subsequent investigators will not have to retrace his steps or question whether he did or did not complete a certain phase necessary to the investigation.

The quality of finished reports is one of the yardsticks that superiors and others use to measure the professional competence of investigators.

The following are some of the earmarks of a good investigative report:

- (1) The report must be COMPLETE--answer all questions-- WHO? WHAT? WHERE? WHEN? WHY? and HOW?
- (2) Report must be ACCURATE--investigator must be meticulous in discovering, observing, and recording facts relative to the incident. Guesswork is ineffective and damaging.
- (3) Report must be BRIEF--does not mean completeness and accuracy should be sacrificed for brevity. Nevertheless, the writer should attempt to eliminate extraneous material.

- (4) Report must be OBJECTIVE--entering into an investigation with a preconceived notion or opinion is very poor technique. Investigators should be interested only in recording facts and evidence.
- (5) Report must be FACTUAL--fact and speculation must not be interwoven.
- (6) Report must be EXPLICIT--continual discourse over irrelevant material must be avoided.

Reports are a professional tool in the fight against criminality. Each investigator can make his efforts more effective and dynamic by constantly working to improve his own contribution to the reporting system.

**END**