Police Report Writing: Why It’s Important and How to Write Successfully

When he was in high school, Rob took a college prep English class. He knew then that he wanted to be a police officer, "picking up bad guys off the street." He couldn’t imagine what purpose the English class would have, questioning, “What do I need to know this for?”

How Many Reports Could an Officer Write?

Now, years later, Captain Rob Moser, Patrol Division, Shawnee, Kansas, Police Department, has a different opinion about the value of writing. He says, “Communication is 90 percent of what we do.” According to his statistics, Shawnee police officers wrote approximately 8,000 reports in 2007. On average, each police officer writes one report a day, five days a week, with the reports ranging from one paragraph to three pages in length. That’s a lot of writing.

Who Reads the Reports?

The reports go to a host of different audiences for different purposes. Sergeants and lieutenants read the officers’ reports for grammar and completeness. The police department’s Record Unit uses the reports to send crime statistics to the state, which tracks the number of criminal incidents, as well as the ages, gender, and races of those involved. Once the sergeants and lieutenants review the reports, they are forwarded to the police department’s detectives. The detectives “need the facts as originally relayed to the officer so they can begin their investigations.” Finally, the reports go to the lawyers—prosecutors and defense attorneys—who use the reports to build their cases.

What Makes a Successful Report?

Captain Moser says that the most important feature of a police report is to “get the story across to the reader as succinctly yet as informatively as possible.”

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In addition, “The reports must be brief but detailed.” Here’s what Captain Moser emphasizes to his officers:

∞ “Write like you’re telling a story so others can easily understand the facts.”
∞ “Tell them who did what, when, why, where, and how.”
∞ “Recount the story in a chronological sequence.”
∞ “Make sure it’s grammatically correct.”

**Why is Grammar So Important?**

According to Captain Moser, poor grammar has at least three negative effects in terms of police report writing. First, flawed grammar makes the report harder to read. Grammar errors are like potholes in the street. Just as potholes distract the driver, so too do grammar errors distract the reader. If a reader has to dodge each pothole, the reader can’t focus on the facts. Effective grammar, in contrast, presents no roadblocks for the reader. Reading the report is easier. Second, grammar errors change the facts of a report. For example, let’s say an officer has responded to a call at “Sacred Heart Church” but incorrectly types this as “Scared Heart Church.” The perpetrator’s name is “Jon Mohr” but the officer types this as “John Moore.” A vehicle identification number is typed incorrectly; a social security number is wrong. Typos change the facts of a case. Finally, and most importantly, each police report is a reflection of the officer, the department, and the city. Captain Moser wants his officers’ reports to “project a professional image of the organization.” Good grammar makes you look good; bad grammar smudges the good reputation of the city and the police department.

**What’s the Bottom Line?**

Good police work is all about good customer service: protecting and serving. When a police officer responds to a citizen call or complaint, the police officer’s job is to document the problem factually, clearly, and concisely. As Captain Moser says, “the better we write our reports, the better service we provide our citizens.”

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**Factoid**

**What happens if a police report is badly written?**

Why are police reports important? Look at the topics that they cover:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>accidents</th>
<th>DUIs and DWIs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>domestic violence</td>
<td>vandalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stalking</td>
<td>fraud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>burglary</td>
<td>arson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shoplifting</td>
<td>assault</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If a report isn’t correctly written, victims suffer and perpetrators walk. According to a study performed by the Coro Foundation (a not-for-profit organization that teaches leadership skills in public affairs), police “report-writing deficiencies are still one of the factors contributing to the high number of cases turned down for prosecution by the DA’s Office.”

A successful police report requires that officers recount who did what, when, where, why and how. Ask your students to read the following police narrative to find answers to the reporter’s questions:

On 10-08-07, at approximately 1100 hrs., I was dispatched to 1436 Maple Avenue, Shawnee, for a family dispute call. This was in response to a call from a concerned neighbor (Jerry Jones).

Upon arrival I determined that an argument took place between John Doe (husband), Jane Doe (wife), and George Doe (stepson/son). During the argument in their house, John pulled a knife on George in a threatening manner. George then pulled a baseball bat and struck John.

John was medically cleared by arriving paramedics. George was later arrested and booked into Johnson County Juvenile Hall for 245(A).1 P.C.- Assault with a deadly weapon.

Who was involved? ___________________________________________________________
What happened? _____________________________________________________________
When did it occur? __________________________________________________________
Where did it take place? _______________________________________________________
Why was the officer called? ___________________________________________________
How did the injury occur? _____________________________________________________

Though the above report answers reporter’s questions, the report still has gaps. What’s missing? After reading the report, what do you not know? Ask your students to imagine that they are either a prosecuting attorney or a defense lawyer. What additional information would they need to prepare for their case?

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Once a police report is written, it is kept on file—forever. Reports can be retrieved from files days, weeks, months, and years after the event occurred. Will the officer who wrote the report remember what he or she meant by vague sentences such as “some objects were stolen,” “a large man ran down the street,” or “the car drove fast”? No, nor will the evidence be valuable in a courtroom.

To write valid reports, officers must be specific. Ask your students to read the following report and underline vague words or phrases.

Report on Office Park Problems

Several incidents involving the unit resulted in fire damage to the computer systems located near the air handler. The most recent occurrences were caused when a valve was opened inadvertently, according to an individual interviewed. This individual reported that water then leaked from the unit, shorting an electrical outlet and causing substantial damage. The individual said that he informed the office owners about the problem soon after he observed it.

To further practice specificity, ask your students to rewrite the following vague sentences, adding detail where needed:

1. The perpetrator stole an expensive item from the store.

2. Weather problems in the area resulted in damage to the apartment complex.

3. Fire in the office caused substantial losses.

4. After checking the perimeter of the house, a broken window and kicked-in door were found.
Police reports must be easy to follow. To achieve flow in their reports, police officers depend on transitional words and phrases that convey sequence, cause and effect, emphasis, addition, and results.

The following table provides some examples of transitional words and phrases:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sequencing ideas</td>
<td>first, second, next, last, following, later, after, then, while</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause and Effect</td>
<td>because, since, thus, therefore, due to this, as a result of, consequently, in order to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>for instance, for example, another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adding a point</td>
<td>next, in addition, besides, not only . . . but also, similarly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrasting</td>
<td>but, instead, yet, however, on the other hand, in contrast, whereas, still</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarizing</td>
<td>to summarize, therefore, in summary, to sum up, consequently, therefore</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ask students to underline transitional words and phrases used in the following report:

As I entered the residence, I saw a young male juvenile lying on the living room floor. He was later identified as Jim Smith. Jim, Robert Smith’s stepson, had a visible wound to his forehead which was bleeding. At approximately 1800 hours, my partner called for paramedics to respond. In the living room was a third person, later identified as Joan Smith, Robert Smith’s wife.

After I separated all parties, I took Robert Smith to the kitchen and asked if there were any weapons in the residence. He pointed to a loaded gun in his kitchen pantry. I confiscated this weapon to be booked into evidence for safekeeping.

While I was interviewing Robert, my partner was interviewing Jim in the living room. Jim stated that his stepfather had become angry with him and hit him on the head with a baseball bat. Jim’s visible injuries to his forehead confirmed this report.

My partner also interviewed Joan Smith. According to Joan, Jim had been drinking on the premises and conducting loud, unruly parties. This made Robert Smith angry. Joan said that around 1700 hours, Robert had screamed at Jim, picked up a bat, and hit the stepson.

When I returned to the living room area with Robert, he overheard his wife’s comments and became extremely angry, shouting “you’re a lying pig. I never touched his stinking hide.” Robert then rushed toward his wife and stepson in a threatening manner. At approximately 1830 hours, we restrained Robert and arrested him for assault with a deadly weapon.
Grammar Workshop

Grammar makes and breaks a police report. We remind students that correspondence written in the workplace (memos, letters, reports, email, and more) act like a photograph of the writer. The readers may only know the writer from what they read. If the correspondence is grammatically clean, then you look like a professional in the photo. If the correspondence is flawed, however, then you (and your organization) look flawed.

To practice proofreading, ask your students to find the 15 or so grammar errors in the following police report:

On 08/01/2008 at approximately 1515 hours I was dispatched to 1212 Hope St. in reference to a battery, upon arrival I was advised by the home owner, John Smith, that his neighbor Ron Brown had broke his door. Ron also pounded on the screened window, and marred the door frame. Ron had complained about Johns barking dog. The got into an argument about the noise. Leading to the broken door. A witnness said she heard the noise and called the police. I took a Digital Photograph of the door, the door frame, and the window. Its been entered into evidence on PS 811-1. Nothing farther to report at this time.

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