



**REPORT WRITING AS AN ESSENTIAL
TOOL TO INVESTIGATIONS**

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Any professional in the security industry, or anyone employed in the criminal justice system for that matter, is probably familiar with writing reports. If one hasn't had to write a report yet, he or she will most likely have to write one at some point in their careers. Writing reports isn't just a one and done occurrence. Report writing is absolutely essential to successful investigations and prosecutions. This paper will explore the purposes and importance of reports as well as provide tips for beginning report writers to refine their skills. There are negative implications to unskilled report writing and may end up halting a person's career to a standstill. Although many of today's investigative reports can be completed in preformatted forms, there are still many scenarios in which one will not have this luxury. It is important to gain a thorough understanding of the purpose of report writing and the uses behind it. Let's examine a few of the ways in which reports are utilized.

1. Accidents in the Workplace

- Incident reports are crucial for corporations and businesses, especially those that are open to the public. Retailers, for example, must be keenly aware of the safety risks that are involved. With high traffic volumes, shelves and displays, potentially dangerous merchandise, escalators, etc., an accident is bound to happen, whether it is a customer or an employee. Filling out a thorough accident report immediately after an accident takes place will save the employer a lot of hassle in the future should any medical or legal issues ensue from the incident. The report can clear the employer of any liability in civil proceedings against the business. These reports are to be written by the individual responding to the scene of the incident.
- Worker's compensation and insurance fraud is a rapidly growing area of crime with the advancement of technology and the depressed economy. Some employees will jump at the chance to exploit and abuse the system. Writing a report immediately after a workplace incident will lower the risk of worker's compensation or insurance fraud significantly. It can also alleviate the risk of civil liability should the employee decide to sue the employer afterwards. Employers who maintain an unsafe workplace riddled with safety hazards will find themselves embroiled in administrative fines and civil litigation.

2. Preliminary Reports

- Preliminary reports are commonly written by uniformed officers when responding to a complaint or a crime. When writing a preliminary report, it should include any all information pertinent to the investigation. This includes information on the individual making the report or the victim, a thorough description or identification of the person making the complaint, details of the incident that transpired, and any other relevant information that can be collected. As Dempsey writes, the preliminary report is like a birth certificate in a case because it begins the investigation (2002, 86). A follow up report is later written to keep tabs on the progress of the investigation and include any new or relevant information gained.

3. Administrative and Managerial Entities

- The reports one writes throughout his or her career are almost always going to be viewed by third parties. In almost all cases, administrative agencies and

supervisors will require that subordinates submit regular reports for the purpose of reviewing progress of an investigation and keeping track of employee productivity. These are sometimes called supervisory review reports (Dempsey, 2002, 84) These reports, when done on a regular basis, help supervisors to keep track of subordinate productivity and the progress being made on all cases.

4. Chain of Custody and Lab Reports

- Evidence will change hands throughout the course of an investigation. In this case, anyone who claims custody of the evidence must complete a chain of custody report. The report should include a detailed, chronological history of the evidence and should contain a detailed description of when and to whom it changed hands. If there are any discrepancies about the chain of custody, it will be hard to prove in court that the evidence shown at trial is the same that was collected at the crime scene. In this case, it is best to limit the transfer of evidence to as little as possible.
- Lab reports are written regarding any form of evidence that requires a laboratory examination. A request for a laboratory analysis is sent to the lab by the investigator. The forensic analyst who conducted the analysis will then submit a report detailing the results of that analysis. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provides instructional courses on sampling procedures, data acquisition, chain of custody, what it is used for, and how the forms are properly used to pass testing samples from one link of the chain of custody to another.

5. Observations

- When assigned to conduct surveillance, a report written by the investigator conducting the surveillance is called an observation report. The report details all actions that the investigator witnesses during the course of the investigation.

These are just a few of the many different kinds of reports the investigator may come into contact with throughout the course of his or her career!

Tips on Investigative Report Writing

1. Follow the Principle of Expansile Significance

- Minor crimes and inconsistencies often turn out to be major crimes or loss events. “Minor is major”! (Gunter and Hertig, 2005). Get all the facts. This includes even the smallest of details. Even if it may seem irrelevant at the time, little pieces of information may manifest themselves as much more significant throughout the course of the investigation.

2. Write Professionally, but Not Pompously

- The report you are writing won’t just be read by people within your department or your field. Don’t assume that everyone will understand certain things you write in the report, because it will only serve to confuse the readers and will damage your credibility. Keep the high-level vocabulary to a minimum and refrain from use of

any lingo or vernacular language. “Police talk” may work on the beat between two partners, but it will not work in a formal report.

3. **Write Neatly and Concisely**

- The more one writes reports, the easier it will become to spill the words out and get it right after a few tries. A good report will consist of thorough, detailed information but will also be fairly brief and to the point. This may be difficult to do at first, but revising and rewriting the report will aid in honing one’s writing skills. Although many of today’s police and investigation departments are driven by technology and many officers can file reports from their computers, there are instances where they will need to be hand written, especially in times of emergency. Write legibly and make sure others will be able to read the writing.

4. **Keep Reports Organized**

- All reports, documents and any audio/visual information should be stored and preserved. Many choose to compile a case folder that keeps everything intact and preserved should it be referred to in the future. This is especially important because it will serve as an easy method of reference and will help to jog the investigator’s memory. Some cases don’t go to court for months or even years, and it is impossible to remember every single detail of the investigation. Having a secure and effective method of storage for cases is extremely beneficial. Always have a hard copy of the report even if it is saved on a computer in case of a power surge or a scenario in which the file couldn’t be accessed or is deleted.

5. **No Notes Equals No Report**

- The accuracy and quality of investigative reports is contingent upon the field notes. Constantly writing things down during one’s day-to-day routines will help to establish a solid foundation for a report should an incident arise. During an investigation it is also crucial to follow this strategy. The notes should be factual and accurate. Yisrael (2010, 428) created a list what should always be included when taking field notes. These include but are not limited to:
 - i. Names of witnesses
 - ii. Notes from interviews of witnesses
 - iii. Vehicle descriptions
 - iv. List of items stolen/broken
 - v. Names/contact information of victims
 - vi. Time the incident occurred
 - vii. Arrival times of emergency personnel
 - viii. Security or safety hazards such as nonworking lights, broken floor tiles, leaking pipes, etc.

Other Interesting Suggestions that Will Make One a Better Report Writer

- Many police and security officers like to use the word “did” right before the verb. It is annoying for supervisors and judges to constantly read things such as “I did move the box, I did observe Joe walk through the door”, and “I did enter the facility” and should be avoided. It’s certainly okay to use “did not” to indicate an omission of action, however.

- Try to keep words in the report to less than three syllables.
- Keep the report properly punctuated so that readers can quickly decipher where one idea ends and another begins.
- Jack Dempsey's NEOTWY format should always be used (2002, 87). The word is an acronym derived from the last letters of When, Where, Who, What, How, and Why. It may sound silly, but it is easy to remember.
- Does the report make sense? Try reading it aloud. If it doesn't make much sense to the officer or investigator, it won't make sense to a judge or supervisor.

What Case Folders Should Always Contain

- Index sheet
- Incident report
- Follow-up or investigatory action reports
- Interview/Interrogation reports
- Record checks
- Photographs, sketches, visual evidence
- Evidence reports
- Chain of custody reports
- Computer printouts
- Audio/video material
- Medical examiner reports

Emerging Trends in Report Writing: Electronic Case Management

The advances in consumer technology have made their way to the arenas of law enforcement and private security. Many retail companies that have loss prevention departments utilize secure online databases such as Wazagua where reports can be filed and referred to on a regular basis. Utilizing secure online databases is a great way to preserve information; if a computer crashes, the report can still be accessed from another computer with internet access. Only an employee of the loss prevention department can access the database and the reports.

G4S Secure Solutions has launched an innovative new program called SecureTrax. This system further cements the company-client relationship by sending the client automatic incident reports as well as live reporting and feedback information from the security officers using SMS text messaging and email. Clients using SecureTrax no longer need to get to a computer to access this kind of information; they can simply access it from their mobile phones. This also eliminates the need for security officers to fill out lengthy reports. It is a method that is cost-efficient, flexible, and effective as a means of report writing and case management. It is also nice because it can be used with previously existing databases, so clients won't be charged for using more than one.

British Investigators have developed an electronic database called HOLMES (Dempsey, 2002, 95), named after the fictional investigator Sherlock Holmes. HOLMES stands for Home Office Large Major Enquiry System and is a case management system designed to organize, process, and retrieve data in any case that is entered into the system. Since the inception of HOLMES in the late 1970's, American law enforcement investigators have traveled to the United Kingdom to study its utilization and adopt similar databases for their own departments. While the utilization

of technology is making investigation much more convenient, it does not and cannot replace good investigative work. Its purpose is to provide a powerful framework of knowledge for the investigator and serve as a reliable tool to retrieve and store information.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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