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Law Enforcement Bulletin

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The protection of the law extends to pedestrians of all types. Photo courtesy of Terry Herbig.

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Report Writing

Do It Right the First Time!

"... a poorly written report frustrates the writer, aggravates the reader, and adds weight to the paperwork burden."

By

WAYNE T. SEAY

Chief of Detectives

Nassau County Police Department

Mineola, NY

While report writing has always been an integral part of police work, current demands for documentation threaten to smother primary police functions in an avalanche of paper. Worse yet, many within the ranks see the same report returned to them for a re-write, frequently several times over.

The reasons behind this are generally very basic. Usually, the report fails to supply the required information, or it does not respond to each allegation in the complaint. Perhaps the report did not answer every question in the initiating memo. Less often, poor organization of material and errors in grammar and spelling render a report unintelligible. Whatever the reason, a poorly written report frustrates the writer, aggravates the reader, and adds weight to the paperwork burden.

Yet, if a report can be salvaged in a re-write, it can be properly prepared in the first place. Any writer who can submit an acceptable report after several attempts can learn to do the job correctly in the original draft.

General Guidelines

Clarity, completeness, and correctness characterize good reports. A writer should remember these goals when organizing his or her thoughts and materials before writing a single word.

Clarity

Except for poetry and abstract fiction, a reader should not have to guess what the writer is trying to say. A report is a direct message; its style should reflect its purpose.

Use plain language to convey a clear meaning. Remember that the purpose of the report is to provide information, not compete for a literary prize. Simple words and sentences should be used instead of complex grammatical structures of polysyllabic terms. The report is being written to state facts, not to impress readers.

Most police writers pepper reports with street slang, acronyms, and "cop talk." Yet, using police jargon, bureaucratic language, and excess words does not make a good or acceptable report. Consider the following sentence: "The perpetrator was observed proceeding to his resident location, where he was apprehended and then transported by the writer and his partner to the jail for incarceration." A good report writer would simply state, "We



Chief Detective Seay



Samuel J. Rozzi
Commissioner

followed John Doe to his home, arrested him, and drove him to jail."

Conciseness is also an important quality to incorporate into written reports. Why write a page when a paragraph will suffice? You can save time, energy, and paper if you keep your reports short and to the point.

Two other points are critical to a good report. First, write in the first person and guard against lapsing into the third person. Many writers begin their reports with "I" but become "the writer" before the report is finished. Also use the active instead of the passive voice whenever possible. It is easier and clearer to say, "I wrote the report," rather than, "The report was written by me." After all, it was the writer who took the action, not the report.

Completeness

To ensure a complete report, begin by asking who, what, where, when, why, and how. By addressing certain questions, you can guarantee that the report will contain all pertinent information and will be free of repetitious and ambiguous statements.

Correctness

An unclear report is baffling, and an incomplete report is annoying, but an incorrect report is unforgivable. A report is a statement of facts, and its readers rely on it to be thorough and accurate. A writer must give a clear and factual account in his or her report. To do so, he or she must check the facts before incorporating them into the report and then document them. It is also important to identify clearly any information that is incorrect. After all, your signature is an affirmation of the information contained in the report. A report

can be well-written, well-organized, and responsive, but if it is inaccurate, it is useless.

Specific Guidelines

A report should deal with only one subject. Title the report in the heading and refer to whatever it is intended to answer.

If you don't know the purpose of the report, you won't be able to respond satisfactorily. Know why the report is being written. Is it responding to an internal memo, a letter of complaint, a claim, etc? If the purpose is not clear, ask your immediate supervisor for clarification. The better you understand the reason for the report, the more likely you can satisfy its needs and the less likely the report will be returned to you for a re-write.

Know who the subjects of the report are and describe them in full. When referring to department members, include name, rank, serial number, shield number, and command. Citizens should be identified by name, address, and connection to the events described (witness, victim, complainant, etc).

Reports should be directed to your commanding officer, unless you are responding to a memorandum. In this case, reply to the person originating the memo. With few exceptions, such as confidential information contained in vice or narcotics reports, all reports should be sent through official channels.

Most memoranda set a deadline for a reply. If the due date cannot be met, request an extension, which can be done by a simple telephone call. If the delay will be a lengthy one, submit an interim report describing what has

“ . . . if a report can be salvaged in a re-write, it can be properly prepared in the first place.”

been done, what remains to be done, the reason for the delay, and the estimated date of completion.

Preparing a Report

Before beginning to write your report, arrange your thoughts and facts in a logical sequence. Chronological order is the most common method of presentation, but it is not the only approach. You may want to present the most important items first, or state what is least important right from the start. Whatever sequence is used, stay with your organizational plan.

The first paragraph should contain a brief summary of the problem or the reason for the report, the conclusion, and any recommendations. A report is not a mystery novel; the resolution of the matter at hand should not be kept a secret until the final paragraph.

Next, describe briefly the events or incidents that are necessary to fully understand the report. Number each paragraph and avoid abbreviations. In most instances, only facts are included in police reports. Any speculations, comments, recommendations, or opinions that are appropriate should be identified clearly as such in your report.

Outline in the report the steps that were taken to investigate the complaint, claim, or subject. Be careful to include conversations with the complainants or witnesses, especially those who refuse to give a written statement.

The initiating memo may specify directions that must be followed. If so, be sure to adhere to them, replying to all allegations and answering all questions.

At the end of the report, restate your conclusions and repeat any rec-

ommendations that were made at the outset. It is also advisable to attach copies of all pertinent statements, reports, forms, diagrams, and photos, etc. A supervisor is responsible for ensuring that all necessary documentation has been prepared, attached, and listed in the final paragraph. He or she is also charged with seeing that the required number of copies have been made, are complete and legible, and have been attached for forwarding.

Cover Report

If multiple reports are required from different departmental personnel, a cover report should be written to serve as a comprehensive summary of all the material. Pertinent details obtained from all attached documents are to be included in this cover report. Also note all contradictory versions and resolve or explain the contradictions wherever possible. In the conclusion of the cover report, include recommendations where indicated and an account of any action taken.

The reader of a properly prepared cover report, who has no prior knowledge of the subject matter, should be able to understand the event without having to read any of the other attachments. This is, in fact, the purpose and intent of the cover report.

Endorsement

Superior officers should review reports forwarded through official channels for completeness, correctness, and clarity and indicate their approval by endorsing the report with their signature or initials. Additional information, clarification, or comments may be typewritten on the last page of the cover report and signed. Brief endorsement statements can be handwritten.

Synopsis

For reports having more than 1½ pages, prepare a synopsis to be directed to the commissioner or chief. A synopsis sheet contains a brief account of the initiating circumstances, steps taken to resolve the issue, the investigator's findings, and any recommendations.

Summary

Report writing is a vital part of police work. Yet, valuable time and energy are expended on reports that must be re-written because of certain deficiencies. This waste of resources can be eliminated if the writer of any police report follows certain guidelines.

First, organize all thoughts and materials before writing a single word, including everything needed for a complete report. Ensure that all facts presented are accurate. Remember to use plain language to avoid spelling and grammatical errors. This will also simplify punctuation. Be concise, clear, and complete. A good report is a timesaver for everyone, especially for the one who takes the time to write it right, and thus, writes it only once.

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