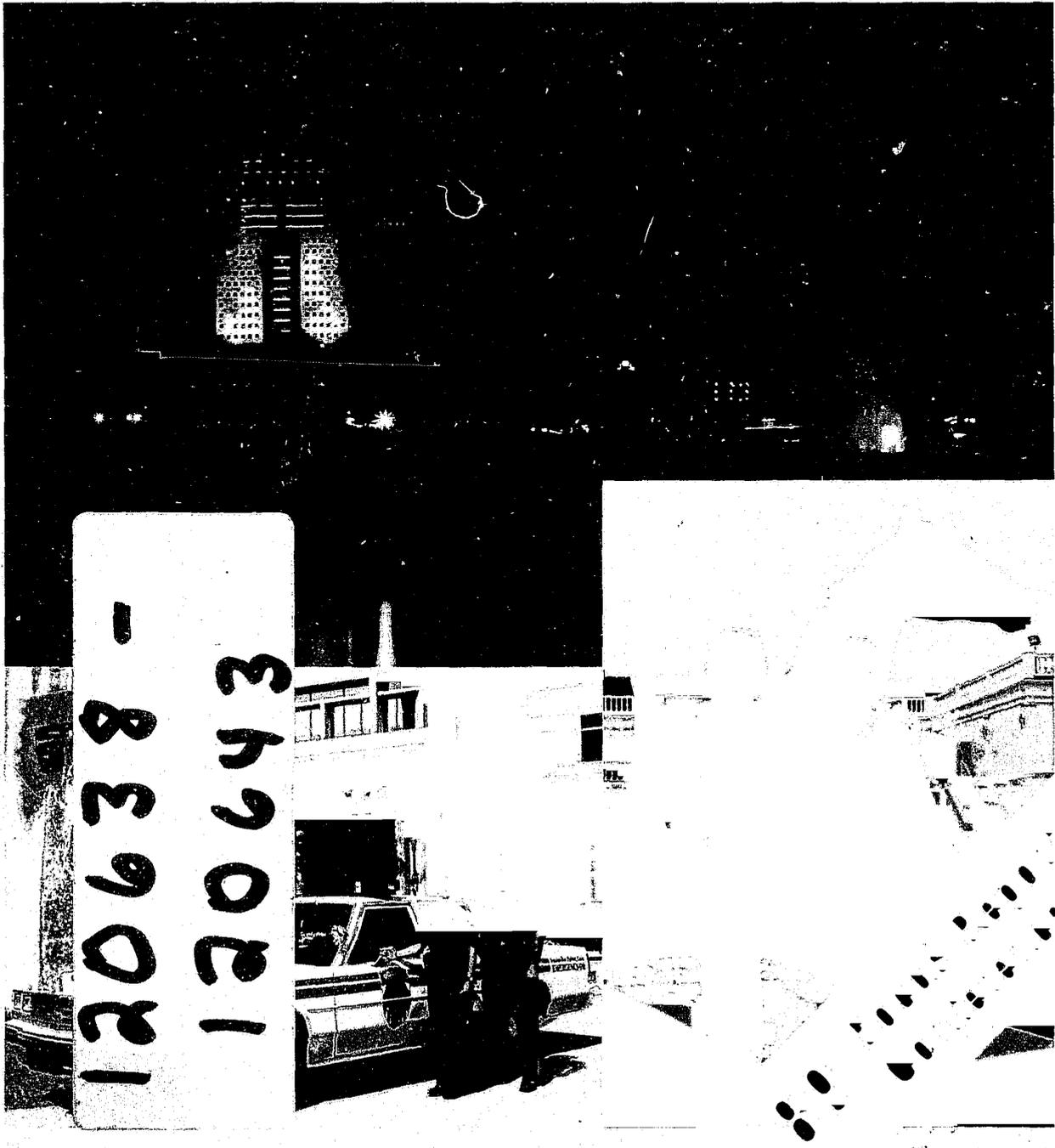


LAW and ORDER

Vol 37, No. 9
September, 1989

AN INDEPENDENT MAGAZINE FOR POLICE MANAGEMENT



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POLICE REPORTS MUST BE READER BASED

by Chief Myron Miller & Paula Pomeranke

According to David W. Godwin of the Champaign, Illinois, Police Department, "today's police officers are more proficient than those of 20 years ago; they are better educated, better trained, better equipped, and better paid.

"Officers must work under more stringent circumstances because their departments and the court system expect a much higher degree of professionalism. However, despite the strides that officers as a group have made, the quality of their written reports may not have improved."

The reports that police officers must write contain the facts surrounding the incident known to them or reported to them at that time. No matter how minor the incident may be, someone outside of law enforcement may need to read that report. If the incident is significant, many people will very likely read it.

Well written reports can be helpful to a department's public relations. Such reports can create a favorable impression with the news media by showing both police competence and credibility. The media will reflect this impression in their coverage, which in turn, inspires public confidence and trust in the police.

All too often, however, police officers believe that report writing is a waste of time. They submit hastily written, poorly developed, and badly composed reports with no thought given to the reader. They rationalize that so long as they include the basic data, they have completed their assignment.

Police officers are among the multitudes of adults who, although they write for a living today, never considered the possibility while they were in high school or college. They just did not think their career would require writing. However, they now find themselves in jobs that requires them to write efficiently and effectively—and their careers depend on it.

While officers are trained extensively in legal processes, human relations, and specific technical procedures, they are evaluated largely on their communication skills. The criminal justice system places great significance on accuracy, clarity, and thoroughness of the written report. Sometimes it seems that the written report is more important than the substantive action that the officer takes in the field.

While much has been written on "how to write a police report," only brief mention is ever made of the writer's audience. An examination of basic training for recruits clearly shows that the

educational levels vary from a minimum of high school to varying levels of college degrees. According to Karl Mehnert, training coordinator at the Police Training Institute (PTI) in Champaign, Illinois, the intent of PTI is to present the importance of good reporting and then to teach the fundamentals. PTI instructors emphasize that because virtually every action an officer takes is ultimately committed to a report in one form or another, recruits must master the ability to translate actions and observations into written reports. A second emphasis is that all law enforcement functions involve maintaining records, constantly referring to them, and, at times, depending on them.

Then the instruction shifts to the make-up of the report. The curriculum adopted by the State of Illinois Police Officer Training Board covers all the elements of a report: who, what, when, where, why, and how. It discusses the need for all relevant information being factual, unbiased, concise, legible, clear in meaning, and thorough.

The next step is to discuss the different types of notes to be taken at the scene of an incident that will be needed to complete a good report, and finally how to prepare a case summary sheet for the States Attorney. At this stage of training, however, neither audience nor reader-based writing is mentioned.

The numerous books about report writing available in most police departments or at the library have similar goals. For example, Thomas J. Agnos and Stanley Schatt in *The Practical Law Enforcement Guide to Written Field Reports* (1980) state that the basic report writing skills developed by officers will be refined and carried with them throughout their careers. Unfortunately, no hint is given as to how officers can further refine their skills beyond the basic skills that were taught in the recruit academy.

Much of the available material mentions that officers must first make certain that the content of their report is complete, accurate, detailed, exact, and objective. Secondly, officers must make sure that the writing is accurate, precise, and objective.

Therefore, the material suggests that the officers need training in the use of words, sentences, and paragraphs. A training manual for report writing from the Champaign, Illinois, Police Department (1985) was formulated to provide training after the academy. It even uses an acronym of POWER to remind officers of the steps of a good report:

Plan, Organize, Write, Evaluate, and Rewrite. However, only one brief statement mentions that many people will read and re-read the report.

In his book *Police Leadership* (1967) Arthur Pell alludes to the topic of this study in a brief statement about the report reader. He writes that a report must read easily, that its form and language should be familiar to the reader, and that, unless the readers are trained in the same language, it should be translated to words that they do understand.

However, a review of actual police reports supports the fact that most are actually writer based. The reports were written to report the facts of the incident using police language in a style that pleased the individual officer, or may have been written to please a supervisor. It does not take long for officers to learn what their supervisor will accept and to write with that thought in mind, instead of considering who else will read it.

Not Progressing

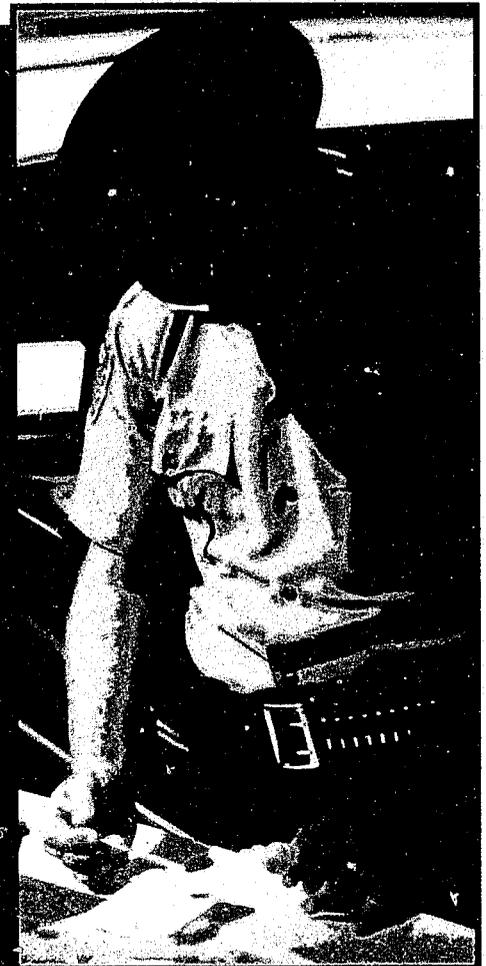
Police report writing is not keeping up with the progress and research in other areas of professional writing, such as technical writing. For example, technical writers identify three fundamental components of communication: a writer, a message, and an audience. J. C. Mathes and Dwight W. Stevenson in *Designing Technical Reports* (1976) point to the problem as it parallels police reports by stating that "many report writers treat the communication situation as if there were only two components: a writer and his message."

Further identification of the problem is that writers often ignore their readers because writers are preoccupied with their own problems and with the subject matter of the communication. The result is a poorly designed, ineffective report. Writers also find it easier to concentrate on their own concerns than to consider the needs of their readers.

They find it difficult to address complex audiences and face the design problems they pose.

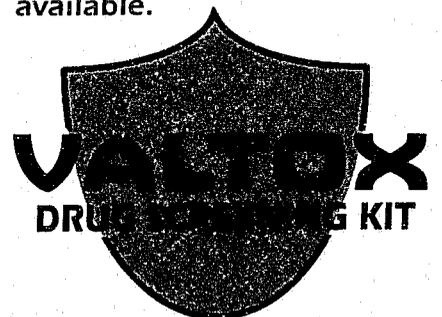
Mathes and Stevenson continue by stating that in order to design a report, a writer needs to analyze who the audience will be. The writer must know not merely the name or title of persons in that audience but who the audience is as related to the purpose and content of the report. They identify three types of audiences for reports: horizontal, vertical and external.

They emphasize that report writers



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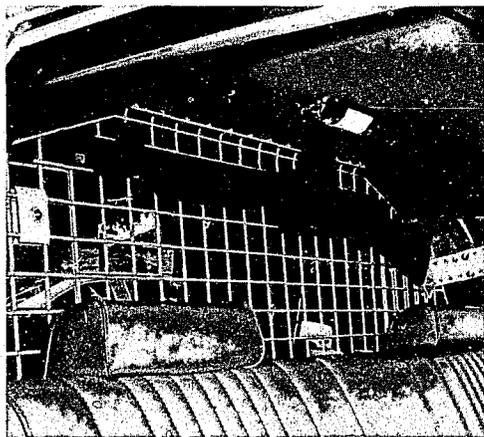
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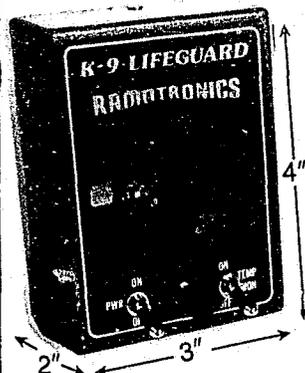
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must first realize that there is a separation between themselves and any of the three types of audiences. Although the writers and their audiences on the horizontal organizational level may have varying educational backgrounds, they do have in common the fact that they work for the same organization and hold similar positions.

However, the differences are magnified when the report goes to audiences on a vertical level. The report goes through the structure of the organization for supervisors or other executives to use as a basis of further action or upon which to base a decision. The third or external audience, whether it consists of a few or many persons, has more distinctive, dissimilar features, and needs than do the horizontal and vertical audiences. An additional complication is that the external audience can judge an entire organization on the basis of the report.

The next step for writers is to examine each of the audiences as individual readers. In doing so writers must identify the different interests of each audience and proceed to determine the functional differences of each. That is, will each audience's concerns and attitudes enable them to react to the report easily or will it be difficult for them to grasp what is being said in the report?

Each of these audiences can be directly related to police report writing. On the horizontal level are fellow patrolmen who read the reports for personal information in the furtherance of their job. On the vertical level are the police supervisors who approve each report or the detectives who act on the report.

Finally, there is the external audience, which would include the news media as well as insurance companies, service agencies, judges, juries, lawyers, and the interested public.

What is important for report writers is that they think systematically about the needs of each audience. Primarily, they should think in terms of the uses to which the report will be put. Moreover, it is not the responsibility of the audience, such as the media, to discover the police officer's meaning; instead it is the officer's duty to present a clear, coherent and accurate account that will not be misunderstood.

The severity of this problem became clear to us several years ago when crime reporters misinterpreted two police reports. The first incident involved a traffic stop of a vehicle that had a toy gun on the back seat. However, since the

word "toy" did not appear in the initial description of the gun, the reporter wrote that there was a submachine gun in the vehicle. Because the public was understandably concerned about such weapons being transported in the community, the Police Department had to print a clarification the next day. The second incident involved a narrative report which described an officer checking on a car stuck in a snow drift. Because of the way it was written, the report made the officer sound like a hero for dragging the intoxicated driver from the car as it burst into flames.

In reality, however, the driver and officer were safely in the squad car, backing away as the car burst into flames. It was not only awkward but also embarrassing to print a correction the following day explaining that the officer was just performing his routine duty and was not a hero in this incident.

These two incidents clearly indicated that supervisors needed to pay more attention to the reports their line officers wrote. However, at the same time, we believed that they needed some training in what to look for in a report that could be confusing to potential readers. Therefore, we designed a training program for supervisors that emphasized what they should look for when reading a report.

We included red-flag areas such as incomplete or confusing information and examples of illogic that could mislead a reader. The training emphasizes that the supervisor is not the terminal reader of many reports because many people outside law enforcement must read the reports in order to perform their jobs as well.

When the supervisors had completed the program, they requested that the line officers also receive training for report writing. Consequently, all line officers were required to attend training that emphasized that their supervisors would probably not be the only readers of their reports and that the writer was responsible for writing a report that is clear for all readers.

Currently, due to personnel changes and additions in the department, the training program will be repeated for new line officers and any officers who are still having problems with their reports.

Officers in these programs have to list all the potential readers they can think of. When they see the list expanding and discuss the need for insurance people, judges, lawyers, coroners, juries, parole officers, and child welfare agencies, for

example, to read reports, they begin to realize the importance of a clearly-written report. At the same time, they can visualize the various backgrounds of these readers and their probable lack of law enforcement experience.

Since its inception the training program has been presented to hundreds of police personnel in Illinois. Participants appreciate the approach that they are professionals writing for other professionals who must perform their assigned duties.

Many officers have commented that they had never really considered the

readers beyond the supervisor. One participant even questioned why no one in his university's criminal justice program had ever explained the concept of writing reader-based reports. Our reply was that we were not certain why this very simple, yet logical, concept is not included in law enforcement training. However, we certainly believe that it should be. L&O

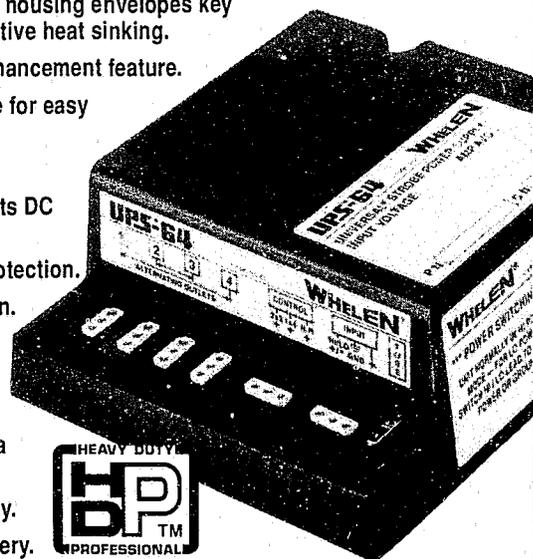
Myron Miller is Chief of the Bloomington, IL, Police Department and Paula Pomeranke is an Assistant Professor, Illinois State University.

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