

Effective Writing and Editing

The clarity, comprehensiveness, and correctness of our memos and reports reflect our professionalism and improve our ability to convince our intended audience. Effective writing also protects the department and you. If, months after you have an interaction with a citizen, you are sued for being rude, for instance, your report or Field Interview may be the only record of the incident. You may recall months later the subject was uncooperative, but unless you give specific actions in your report (e.g., he cursed at you and what he said, he refused to take his hands out of his pockets, she walked away when you were trying to investigate something), it never happened! Further, other officers also read our reports. A well written report reflects positively on our department, and sufficient detail may help an officer dealing with your subject in the future. An extra paragraph or two in your report now can be beneficial later. Don't be lazy. Writing good reports is a required professional skill. It may save a lot of time and money, and even a life!

Every report should address:

- Who? Names, addresses, DOBs, telephone numbers, gender, race and any distinguishing characteristics or mannerisms.
- What? What happened? State events chronologically.
- When? Time, date, day of the week.
- Where? Location. Be specific. Don't just identify road; which lane was it in? northbound or southbound? at an intersection? Street address?
- Conditions, if appropriate. (If an auto accident, was it raining? How was the visibility? Were the roads icy?)
- How? What were the means?
- Why? (Do not give your opinion. Specific reasons can be obtained from the subject's statement.)
- Actions you took and why you took them. Include any follow-up actions you plan to take.

The following examples are taken from actual Incident Based Reports (IBRs), with some editorial license.

1. Don't attribute motivation to acts unless explicitly made as part of a confession.
 - The [irate] driver [intentionally] struck the car. (How do you know driver's state of mind/intent?)
2. Provide specific detail (see *italics*)
 - He was found outside the Provost's office, *located in Rm xxx in the Reynolds Building, at 1400.*
 - He was wearing a black shirt (*long- or short-sleeves? Did the shirt have a collar? Any writing on the shirt? What did it say? On front or back? Too large? Tucked in?*).
 - The driver sped off *in a late model red Dodge Caravan with a Virginia registration. Did he almost hit someone? How fast was he driving? Did the tires squeal? Faster than other motorists?*
 - The suspect was placed in a police cruiser and transported to the Magistrate's office → *We placed the suspect in Officer Bagodonuts' cruiser, number 1101. Officer Bagodonuts transported him to the Magistrate's office at 2245 hours.*
 - Mr. Smith identified a tall white male in his early twenties. *How tall?* [Someone 5'10" is tall to someone who is 5'1".]
 - The magistrate issued a felony warrant. → The magistrate issued a *Class 6* felony warrant.
 - The suspect used profanity to me. → The suspect called me "a piece of shit".

- All weapons were re-holstered within 18 seconds *as verified by Lensec cameras*. (Preserve and protect this footage as evidence.)
- Avoid wordy and official-sounding prose. Write the way you speak.
 - He then proceeded to speed out of the B2 lot. → *He sped away from the B2 lot.*
 - The case was investigated by this officer. → *I investigated the case.*
 - I was able to catch up with the suspect. → *I caught up with the suspect.*
 - In regards to... → *Regarding...*
 - He utilized a firearm when he robbed the bank. → *He used a firearm to rob the bank.* [Never utilize utilize when you can utilize “use”!]
 - [Be advised] the suspect is 6’ tall. → *The suspect is 6’ tall.* “Be advised” adds no useful info.
 - At that point, the suspect surrendered. → *Then, the suspect surrendered.*
 - At this point in time → *Now.*
 - Write in the active voice; not the passive voice.
 - The subject was searched by me. → *I searched the subject.*
 - The crime was committed by the suspect. → *The suspect committed the crime.*
 - Pay attention to detail.
 - Mr. Smith refused to give a statement. *vs.* Mr. Smyth refused to give a statement. (Is the last name spelled ‘Smith’ or ‘Smyth’? A defense attorney will use this lack of attention to detail to undermine everything else you write. If the defense attorney can impugn your professionalism, a jury will not find your testimony credible.)
 - In an IBR with a supplement by a second officer, one officer said the vehicle was struck on the driver’s side while the other said it was the passenger side.
 - Avoid inflammatory language.
 - We pulled him out of the vehicle. → *We removed him from the vehicle.*
 - We threw him to the ground. → *We escorted him to the ground.* [I love this one!] *We used control tactics to secure the suspect and avoid the escalation of violence.* Additionally, you may want to state how, such as an arm-bar take-down.
 - Don’t be overly cautious.
 - Based on my investigation, it appears the use of force was reasonable. → *Based on my investigation, I conclude the use of force was reasonable and consistent with NOVA Police General Orders and current legal precedents.*
 - Reduce unnecessary ‘that’ connectors.
 - He advised that he was tired. → *He advised (or, better, said) he was tired. He said he was tired.*
 - I saw that he was nervous. → *I saw he was nervous. [Actually, it would be better to say “I concluded the suspect was nervous based on his profuse sweating, furtive eye movements, and exaggerated hand gestures.”]*

Other rules/considerations:

9. Go easy on the adverbs. They don't add much.
 - He was very excited. → He was excited. (How much is "very"? It is better to describe behavior and let the reader decide. An officer acts on behaviors.)
 - I want to write a [really, really, really] good police report.
 - He was [extremely] agitated. Instead, tell what characteristics led you to this conclusion, such as profuse sweating, flushed face, etc.
10. Check your spelling. Use spell checker, or a dictionary, but remember, spell check will not identify a wrong word spelled correctly.
 - Sometimes, you need to know the grammar:
 - It's vs. its
 - It's = it is; not the possessive. [e.g. Its color is yellow. It's going to be a hot day.]
 - There (location or an article of speech) vs. their (possessive) vs. they're
 - Their alibis are questionable.
 - The suspect is there.
 - There are three elements of the crime.
 - Their alibi they were there was disproven by surveillance camera video.
 - They're going to come to the office to make a report.
11. Avoid long sentences; keep them short, using commas and periods.
 - The suspect identified himself as William Jones and said he observed the suspect take two bottles of Pepsi Cola from the store's shelf at 2314 while he was there to buy aspirin for his wife, Jill, who's been suffering from arthritis in her left knee since she was a young girl.
12. Use quotation marks if you are relating someone's exact words.
13. Ensure the proper order of subjects:
 - Correct: Officer Bagodonuts, Officer Happy, and I arrested the suspect.
 - Incorrect: I, Officer Bagodonuts, and Officer Happy arrested the suspect.
14. Ensure proper subject/verb agreement [singular subjects require singular verbs; plural subjects take plural verbs]
 - Correct: The officer and his trainee are in the cruiser.
 - Incorrect: The officer and his trainee is in the cruiser.
15. Stay in the proper (verb) tense.
 - Incorrect: He stated he went into the store. Then he says [should be 'said'], "I'm innocent, Officer."
16. Pay attention to apostrophes
 - Plural possessives take their apostrophe after the "s", unless the word itself is plural.
 - The boys' alibi was a lie. (There was a group of boys.)
 - The women's alibi was a lie.