

The Importance of the Police Report

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The Importance of the Police Report

Most entertainment media represents police work as an unrelenting and constant barrage of exciting chases and shootouts, where the good guy always wins in the end. Unfortunately, this is, for the most part, quite an inaccurate depiction of the majority of police work. In fact, I believe the vast majority of good police work is supported entirely by an officer's ability to present accurate, detailed and informative information in the form of the police report. Nearly every service we perform as police officers calls for the initiation of some type of permanent record. This record may be anything from a single line entry concerning an unlocated problem to a lengthy detailed investigative document describing unimaginable pain and suffering.

One's skills as a police officer are largely evaluated based on his or her written reports. An officer must not only be able to do his job well and within the scope of the law, but he must also be able to accurately record information concerning those activities and present it to those who were not there.

In most instances, the ranking supervisor will not be present as an officer is investigating an incident. It will likely be this supervisor who ultimately reviews and passes judgment on the reports generated by the officer. It will be this supervisor's responsibility to determine whether or not the officer followed the proper policies and procedures of the department, as well as applicable laws concerning the initial investigation. Eventually there is the potential for a large number of people to read these reports. In many instances, it will be up to some of these people

to pass judgment on others based on much of the information presented in these police reports. Follow up investigators from the original department, and/or other agencies will determine what an officer has done in the case based on the information that has been presented in the report. These officers will then have to decide what they will need to do next in order to continue the investigation and successfully bring it to a close.

Initial investigating officers should not only indicate what they did in their reports, but should also record what they did not do, and the reasons why. For example, if an attempt was made to contact a potential witness and that contact was not made because the witness works nights, then this information should be listed in the report. This would be important information for the follow up investigators to know before potentially wasting valuable time. Follow up investigators will often retrace the initial investigating officer's footsteps, and potentially complete a number of unnecessary steps that could have been avoided had the original officer recorded all of his actions. This could relate to a tremendous loss of valuable time.

Since these initial investigating officers are generally the first responding officers to the scene of an incident, it is of paramount importance to accurately and descriptively record short-lived evidence. These could include odors, stains, sounds, even the actions, statements and demeanor of witnesses, suspects and victims. The drama of heated verbal exchanges or physical altercations between an officer and an attacker may seem bland, uneventful or even routine to one reading the police report if all of the information is not listed.

As a prosecutor sits in his office some days after a crime has occurred, he will not have the ability to hear the frantic screams of the victim nor be able to smell the blood and burnt gunpowder. It will be up to the prosecutor to understand the full scope of the event simply by reading the police reports. He will then have to determine whether all of the elements of the crime have been presented, in order to sustain the proper charge, and ultimately prove the case. In addition to the prosecutor, Judges, other attorneys and juries will have to rely on specific information recorded in police reports to make a decision about the honesty, deception, guilt and/or innocence of the parties involved in the reported event.

Many officers seem to be under the impression that the police report they are writing will simply find itself in a dark cabinet drawer somewhere never to be seen again. They do not consider the importance of the document as it is being written, nor do they consider those who may end up reading it. Insurance companies require completed police reports before they can act on claims by victims. These reports may initiate further investigations by representatives of the insurance companies, as well as further criminal investigation. The majority of police reports are considered public record and available to anyone desiring to obtain them. Media representatives may read most available police reports as they look for an interesting story. The victims, witnesses and suspects listed in these reports often have the opportunity to obtain and read them. If the report is inaccurate, misleading or untruthful, there could be damaging repercussions. An officer's integrity and credibility is at stake.

Types of Police Reports

Because most police action requires some type of documentation, there are a number of different types of reports that are filed by police officers. Since most of these reports are specific to certain types of events, most police departments have adopted specific forms to be filled out concerning a common occurrence. These report forms generally contain blank spaces, lines or boxes for specific information to be written in such as symbols, numbers or other identification and statistical information. In general, an officer simply writes the pertinent information in these spaces, then goes about constructing the body of the report, which is the narrative. Though most departments design and print their own forms, the majority of them are quite similar in nature and design, as they require pretty much the same information. There may be dozens of different forms used by police agencies everywhere, but probably the four (4) most common types of pre-printed police report forms fall into the following categories, listed in no particular order of importance:

- 1. Offense Reports**
- 2. Incident Reports**
- 3. Arrest Reports**
- 4. Accident Reports**

Offense Reports

Offense reports, often called Crime Reports, are just that. They are reports of some type of criminal action against another. The victim is usually an individual, but may also be an organization or entity such as a business or even the City or State Government itself. There are

literally hundreds of types of criminal violations that occur, with far-reaching and different consequences. This is why everything should be considered important as it relates to the reported crime, or the elements of that crime. For instance, what may appear to be a burglary is not really a burglary at all unless certain elements have been met. Likewise, a robbery is not really a robbery unless certain elements of that crime have been met. Some events may have begun as one crime and then escalated into another, more serious, crime. Police officers must know what information they need to determine what elements are present, so that the specific crime can be identified. All of this information should be recorded to indicate exactly what happened during the event.

Offense reports are generally one of the more detailed, if not the most detailed of police reports. These reports generally contain considerably more information about the particular methods a crime has been carried out, the specific injuries or property damages sustained by a victim and all the different directions an officer took to investigate the crime. These reports usually contain all of the necessary information to obtain arrest warrants for the suspects, so most of that information is not needed on the arrest report once the suspect is taken into custody.

The offense report form itself may be quite detailed, leaving only a limited amount of space for the narrative. The offense report form currently used by the Fort Smith Police Department (see Figure 1) contains a minimum of four pages. This form provides blank spaces for hand written information as well as a number of small boxes to be filled in using certain

FORT SMITH POLICE DEPARTMENT

Page 1

Suspect Information

Event # Record #

Use (Type, Model if known):

Sex: Male Female Other

RACE: White Black Asian Indian Other

DOB: Age Range: 18-24 25-34 35-44 45-54 55-64 65-74 75+

POB: State:

Subject Address: City, State, Zip:

Address:

Occupation:

Vehicle:

Vehicle Make/Model/Color:

GL: Glasses P: Piercing M: Mole S: Scar T: Tattoo MB: Missing Body Part AL: Clothing

SUSPECT INFORMATION - METHOD OF OPERATION

TYPE: 1. Burglary 2. Rape 3. Kidnapping 4. Child Abuse 5. Domestic Violence 6. Stalking 7. Other

PLACE OF ATTACK: 1. Home 2. Vehicle 3. Workplace 4. Public Place 5. Other

POINT OF ENTRY: 1. Front Door 2. Back Door 3. Window 4. Other

METHOD OF ATTACK

1. Force Applied 2. Knife 3. Gun 4. Other

TYPE OF PROPERTY

1. Personal 2. Commercial 3. Public 4. Other

WEAPON TYPE

1. Knife 2. Gun 3. Other

USE OF WEAPON

1. Used 2. Not Used

METHOD OF DEPARTURE

1. On Foot 2. In Vehicle 3. Other

DEMANDER OF SUSPECT

1. None 2. Other

Page 3

FORT SMITH POLICE DEPARTMENT

Page 1

Suspect Information

Event # Record #

Use (Type, Model if known):

Sex: Male Female Other

RACE: White Black Asian Indian Other

DOB: Age Range: 18-24 25-34 35-44 45-54 55-64 65-74 75+

POB: State:

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METHOD OF DEPARTURE

1. On Foot 2. In Vehicle 3. Other

DEMANDER OF SUSPECT

1. None 2. Other

Page 4

Incident Reports

An incident report, sometimes referred to as a call for service report, or a complaint report, is a report that is written that outlines the occurrence of specific events that are not really considered criminal in nature. If a person calls the police because they observe something that appears to be suspicious, and an officer investigates only to find that no crime has occurred, this is the type of information that would be listed on an incident report. These reports are usually very short, but could be rather lengthy given the nature of police work, and types of odd predicaments people find themselves in occasionally.

As mentioned previously the Fort Smith Police Department has designed its Incident Report Form to be multi-functional (Figure 2). This form provides almost the entire portion of the page for narrative. In addition to its use as an incident report, this form has boxes that can be checked indicating that this might be additional offense narrative information, or an additional arrest narrative or a supplemental investigation. The corresponding offense / Incident number identifying the case would be written in the box at the upper-most left corner. If this number does not correspond with any other report, then there is probably no crime and a brief description of the incident is all that is needed.

Figure 2 Fort Smith Police Department Incident Report

Arrest Reports

The Arrest report is a very important document, as it outlines the reasons that a person's freedom has been temporarily taken from him. Arrest reports should contain information concerning how and why an officer has encountered the arrested party. It needs to contain all of the observations an officer makes pertaining to the commission of the crime or crimes. The report should also contain information about what was necessary in order to take the subject into

custody. Was there a use of force and if so why? This information may very well lead to other investigations, including internal investigations to determine potential police misconduct. As I indicated previously, a detailed offense report may contain all the required information to outline and sustain an arrest charge. If this is the case, it will seldom be necessary to repeat all of this information in the arrest report itself, but a brief summary should be given.

Other? Incident # _____ Page 3

**FORT SMITH POLICE DEPARTMENT
ARREST REPORT**

Event # _____ Record # _____ Booking # _____

Adult Arrest Juvenile Arrest

Total Number of Arrests _____

Last First Middle _____ Suffix _____

DOB / / Age Range _____ Hgt _____ Wgt _____ Hair _____ Eyes _____ BUILD _____ SSN _____

PCB City, State _____ ETHNICITY _____ Heavy Medium Slender Male Female

Director Arrest _____ Title _____ Reporting Officer / ID # _____ ARREST TYPE _____

On-Viol Warrant Summons

DISPOSITION OF ARRESTIVE UNDER 18 _____ Disposition Date _____ Reviewing Supervisor / ID # _____

Handed Within Dept. Submited To Other Authority

Tracking # _____ LOCATION TYPE _____ MULTIPLE CLEARANCE INDICATOR _____

Bank Vehicle Parking Lot Business Not Applicable Multiple

Residence Street Tavern/Bar/Club Arrest Cleared Offense Arr. Clear Multi-Off. Clearance

BAC _____ Arrest Location _____ Telephone _____ TRF of AGG _____ Time at Address _____ Resident Unk.

Address, City, State, Zip _____ Non-Resident

Employer _____ Occupation _____ Telephone _____ Address, City, State, Zip _____

**A
R
R
E
S
T**

SCARS/MARKS/TATTOOS/CLOTHING

GL Goggles _____ P Planning _____

M Mole _____ S Scar _____

MB Missing Body Part _____ T Tattoo _____

XL Clothing _____

Charge	Incident #	Event	Offense Code	Description	Level	Warrant #
1					<input type="checkbox"/> Misdemeanor <input type="checkbox"/> Felony	
2					<input type="checkbox"/> Misdemeanor <input type="checkbox"/> Felony	
3					<input type="checkbox"/> Misdemeanor <input type="checkbox"/> Felony	
4					<input type="checkbox"/> Misdemeanor <input type="checkbox"/> Felony	

DRUG TYPE _____ CRIMINAL ACTIVITY _____ DRUG TYPE TABLE _____ WEAPON TYPE _____

(Choose up to three) (Choose up to three) (Choose up to three) (Choose up to two)

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____

Weapon 1 _____

Weapon 2 _____

**N
A
R
R
A
T
I
V
E**

The Fort Smith Police Department Arrest Report form (Figure 3) is a single page report that utilizes about two-thirds of the page for fill in the blank information, and the remaining third of the page for narrative. This report is actually printed on the back side of the Incident Report, requiring an officer to simply flip the page and continue a lengthy narrative.

Figure 3 Fort Smith Police Department Arrest Report

Accident Reports

Accident reports describe the events and causes that unfold during motor vehicle accidents. I believe accident reports have the highest potential to be viewed by more people than any of the other police reports filed. These forms are filed more so for insurance purposes than

for criminal investigation purposes, although many accident investigations do lead to criminal charges. These reports are much more likely to be viewed by the involved parties than the average offense, incident or arrest report. A number of people involved with insurance companies will look at the accident report, and complete or begin their own investigation based on much of the information in that report. Copies of each of these reports must be sent to the State, where they will be viewed by a number of people. Cities and towns use these reports to determine problem intersections and roadways.

A great number of people involved in accidents and subsequently cited for traffic violations end up in court pleading their cases. There is good reason for this too, because many of these cases also end up with Civil Claims having been brought about, especially if there is a large monetary loss or serious injury. Just imagine the number of people that are likely to look at an accident report.

The Arkansas Motor Vehicle Collision Report form is utilized by every police agency in the state. In addition to the four-page basic report form (Figure 4), there are several other forms that may be needed, depending on the types of vehicles involved, such as large commercial vehicles. Since this paper is primarily concerned with the content of report narratives, I will not go into these additional accident report pages.

Figure 4 Arkansas Motor Vehicle Collision Report

Page ____ of ____

ARKANSAS MOTOR VEHICLE COLLISION REPORT (Rev. 05/00)

Report #	Unit Assigned	Premises	Geo Code	District
No Day Yr	Day of Week	Time Of Collision	No. Of Vehicles	Time Notified
County	City	Not In City, But	Director	C/S Limits
Road Street Highway	Section	Log Mile	AI Intersection With	Posted
Not At Intersection, But	N <input type="checkbox"/> S <input type="checkbox"/> E <input type="checkbox"/> W			Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

VEHICLE # (PEDESTRIAN #)	VEHICLE # (PEDESTRIAN #)
Commercial Vehicle Supplement Required? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	Commercial Vehicle Supplement Required? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Driver's Name (First/M/Last Name)	Driver's Name (First/M/Last Name)
Address	Address
City	City
State	State
Zip Code	Zip Code
Additional Information	Additional Information
DOB Race Sex Driver's License State Class	DOB Race Sex Driver's License State Class
Blood/Breath/Urine Test Requested Results (If Known)	Blood/Breath/Urine Test Requested Results (If Known)
Vehicle Owner's Name (First/M/Last Name)	Vehicle Owner's Name (First/M/Last Name)
Address	Address
City	City
State	State
Zip Code	Zip Code
Vehicle Description Year Make	Vehicle Description Year Make
Model Body Style Color	Model Body Style Color
Vehicle Identification Number Estimated Damage	Vehicle Identification Number Estimated Damage
Vehicle License Plate None	Vehicle License Plate None
Year State Number	Year State Number
Trailers # Of Units Reg State Plate #	Trailers # Of Units Reg State Plate #
From Vehicle Damage? If Yes, Describe Damage & Location	From Vehicle Damage? If Yes, Describe Damage & Location
Vehicle Damage As Result Of Collision	Vehicle Damage As Result Of Collision
Name Of Tow Service	Name Of Tow Service
Address Vehicle Removed To	Address Vehicle Removed To
City State Zip Code	City State Zip Code
Additional Information	Additional Information
Insurance Company Policy #	Insurance Company Policy #

Page ____ of ____

Vehicle #	Point Of Initial Contact	Vehicle #	Point Of Initial Contact
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Damage To Property Other Than Vehicle	Object Struck	Owner's Name	Damage Estimate \$
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		Address (City/State/Zip Code)	Owner Notified <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Witness Name(s) (First/M/Last Name)		Address (City/State/Zip Code)	
Citation(s) Issued To (First/M/Last Name)		Charge(s) And Statute Number(s)	
Narrative		Citation Number	

APPROXIMATE CONDITIONS	RELATION TO JURISDICTION
1) Dry 4) Wet	1) Non-accident 4) Alley
2) Fog 5) Fog With Rain	2) Incomplete 5) Full Lane
3) Snow 6) Ice	3) Complete Street 6) Full Lane
TRAFFIC CONTROL	TRAFFIC CONTROL
1) Stop Sign 4) Red Light	1) 2 W. County, White & Spring
2) Stop Sign 5) Stop Sign	2) 2 S. County, White & Spring
3) Stop Sign 6) Stop Sign	3) 2 S. County, White & Spring
4) Stop Sign 7) Stop Sign	4) 2 S. County, White & Spring
5) Stop Sign 8) Stop Sign	5) 2 S. County, White & Spring
6) Stop Sign 9) Stop Sign	6) 2 S. County, White & Spring
7) Stop Sign 10) Stop Sign	7) 2 S. County, White & Spring
8) Stop Sign 11) Stop Sign	8) 2 S. County, White & Spring
9) Stop Sign 12) Stop Sign	9) 2 S. County, White & Spring
10) Stop Sign 13) Stop Sign	10) 2 S. County, White & Spring
11) Stop Sign 14) Stop Sign	11) 2 S. County, White & Spring
12) Stop Sign 15) Stop Sign	12) 2 S. County, White & Spring
13) Stop Sign 16) Stop Sign	13) 2 S. County, White & Spring
14) Stop Sign 17) Stop Sign	14) 2 S. County, White & Spring
15) Stop Sign 18) Stop Sign	15) 2 S. County, White & Spring
16) Stop Sign 19) Stop Sign	16) 2 S. County, White & Spring
17) Stop Sign 20) Stop Sign	17) 2 S. County, White & Spring
18) Stop Sign 21) Stop Sign	18) 2 S. County, White & Spring
19) Stop Sign 22) Stop Sign	19) 2 S. County, White & Spring
20) Stop Sign 23) Stop Sign	20) 2 S. County, White & Spring
21) Stop Sign 24) Stop Sign	21) 2 S. County, White & Spring
22) Stop Sign 25) Stop Sign	22) 2 S. County, White & Spring
23) Stop Sign 26) Stop Sign	23) 2 S. County, White & Spring
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29) Stop Sign 32) Stop Sign	29) 2 S. County, White & Spring
30) Stop Sign 33) Stop Sign	30) 2 S. County, White & Spring
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41) Stop Sign 44) Stop Sign	41) 2 S. County, White & Spring
42) Stop Sign 45) Stop Sign	42) 2 S. County, White & Spring
43) Stop Sign 46) Stop Sign	43) 2 S. County, White & Spring
44) Stop Sign 47) Stop Sign	44) 2 S. County, White & Spring
45) Stop Sign 48) Stop Sign	45) 2 S. County, White & Spring
46) Stop Sign 49) Stop Sign	46) 2 S. County, White & Spring
47) Stop Sign 50) Stop Sign	47) 2 S. County, White & Spring
48) Stop Sign 51) Stop Sign	48) 2 S. County, White & Spring
49) Stop Sign 52) Stop Sign	49) 2 S. County, White & Spring
50) Stop Sign 53) Stop Sign	50) 2 S. County, White & Spring
51) Stop Sign 54) Stop Sign	51) 2 S. County, White & Spring
52) Stop Sign 55) Stop Sign	52) 2 S. County, White & Spring
53) Stop Sign 56) Stop Sign	53) 2 S. County, White & Spring
54) Stop Sign 57) Stop Sign	54) 2 S. County, White & Spring
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68) Stop Sign 71) Stop Sign	68) 2 S. County, White & Spring
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70) Stop Sign 73) Stop Sign	70) 2 S. County, White & Spring
71) Stop Sign 74) Stop Sign	71) 2 S. County, White & Spring
72) Stop Sign 75) Stop Sign	72) 2 S. County, White & Spring
73) Stop Sign 76) Stop Sign	73) 2 S. County, White & Spring
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87) Stop Sign 90) Stop Sign	87) 2 S. County, White & Spring
88) Stop Sign 91) Stop Sign	88) 2 S. County, White & Spring
89) Stop Sign 92) Stop Sign	89) 2 S. County, White & Spring
90) Stop Sign 93) Stop Sign	90) 2 S. County, White & Spring
91) Stop Sign 94) Stop Sign	91) 2 S. County, White & Spring
92) Stop Sign 95) Stop Sign	92) 2 S. County, White & Spring
93) Stop Sign 96) Stop Sign	93) 2 S. County, White & Spring
94) Stop Sign 97) Stop Sign	94) 2 S. County, White & Spring
95) Stop Sign 98) Stop Sign	95) 2 S. County, White & Spring
96) Stop Sign 99) Stop Sign	96) 2 S. County, White & Spring
97) Stop Sign 100) Stop Sign	97) 2 S. County, White & Spring

Page ____ of ____

Diagram

You will notice that less than one-half of one of the four pages (Page 2) in the basic accident report has been allotted for the narrative. I believe that this gives police officers a false impression about the importance of the narrative, and unfortunately, most accident report narratives reflect this perceived lack of importance (see Figure 5). I often tell officers that the accident report narrative should tell me almost everything I need to know about the accident. I should be able to read the narrative and know, who, what, where, when, why and how, without having to flip through the other three pages to understand what has happened. This information is critical in any report, and is what I call the Report Style.

Narrative
Operator 1, Mr. Walker, said that he was South on Lexington when V#2 ran the stop sign and hit him.
Operator 2, Ms. Spradley, said that she was West on South R. and ran the stop sign hitting V#1.
Officer Notes: When I arrived I asked what happened. Ms. Spradley walked up to me and said "I ran the stop sign". While working the accident Mr. Walker started to act. He said that his wife would take him to the Dr. Later, Operator 1, Mr. Walker, said that after he hit he spun around twice.

Figure 5 An actual accident report narrative turned in as a finished product.

Report Style

As I have outlined previously there are a number of specific report forms utilized by officers and departments all over the world. These forms make it easier to quickly allow an officer to get to the meat of the matter, which is the narrative of the report. The narrative should

explain all of the fundamentals of the occurrence, in an understandable and chronological order of events. The narrative is really the most crucial part of the report, as it tells the all-important story. It should explain who was involved, what happened, where it happened, when it happened, why it happened the way it did and how all these events unfolded.

I do not understand why it is that normal, intelligent and fairly well spoken people who become police officers suddenly stop talking normally. New police officers tend to suddenly adopt a lot of police jargon, much of which the average person will not understand. Police cars suddenly become "patrol units" or "squads," I or we transform into things like "undersigned," or "officers," and people change into "victim #1," or "suspect #2." Unfortunately, this tends to get more detailed and can go on and on indefinitely. Usually this type of strange language just tends to confuse the average reader, and does not really impress anyone at all.

To quote Thomas Adams, "What happened to good 'olde' English?" (1994, p. 166) Adams goes on to discuss how things would be far less difficult if officers would simply write their reports the way they talk. I agree with this to a certain extent. Unfortunately I have read far too many reports that were written exactly the way the officer talks, which is usually just as improper, if not worse than using all the police jargon. Figure 6 shows a number of examples of improper grammar or word usage that I have taken from police reports that have been submitted. I have compiled this information into a short report that I have entitled What's The Problem?, which I update regularly and provide to my subordinates. We, most people in general, "talk

wrong," as I frequently say to the officers I am supervising, and whose reports I must approve before they are sent on to be seen by who knows how many more people. I go on to explain that we speak incorrect English, often using incomplete sentences and words, slang terms and improper grammar. We do this because we are inherently lazy, and have accepted these mannerisms as normal. If this is the way most of us talk, we should not be encouraged to write this way, though many do. Often, we even speak in incomplete thoughts, because when we speak we are able to use hand gestures, facial expressions and voice inflection to assist in getting that "all important" point across. I understand what Adams means by his statement though. He means that we should write a report as though we were explaining what happened to a friend or coworker, and leave out the jargon, slang and improper grammar.

Figure 6 What's The Problem?

Laying vs. lying:	Example "I saw the subject laying on the ground." Correct I saw the subject lying on the ground. Laying is a physical act of placing an object. Lying means to physically recline, to lie prostrate or prone. Lay and Lie as well. One might lay an object down and then lie himself next to it.
Sitting vs. Setting	Example "was setting in the chair by the table" Correct "was sitting in the chair by the table" Setting is a physical act of placing an object or objects, such as setting a table or setting something into a location, (setting a post, etc.) Sitting is the physical act of resting ones body in an upright position in a chair for example. Sit and Set as well.
Seen vs. saw	Example "I seen the subject lying on the ground." Correct I saw the subject lying on the ground. Seen and Saw are both past tense usage of the verb see. If the word seen is used, it should be preceded by the word had or have.
Should of vs. Should have	"The suspect should of known" Correct The suspect should have known.....etc. Also commonly seen as: could of, would of, must of, etc. All these should be changed to have, instead of the word "of."
Passerbyers vs. Passersby	"information was given by the passerbyers..." Correct "information was given by the passersby..." Passerbyers is not a word. More than one passerby would be passersby.
To vs. Too vs. Two	Example "said V2 was traveling to fast and couldn't stop" Correct "said V2 was traveling too fast....." To is directive, as in the direction of, or toward. Too means also. Two is a number.

Many Supervisors believe that officers should present an unbiased relationship to victims and suspects, and that they can present this detached image better by writing their reports in a third person manner. There are some departments that will accept nothing less than reports written this way. Some believe that this will avoid the impression that police officers are egotistical by using "I" too often in the report. Others believe that it simply looks and sounds more professional. If an officer is in a court and describing events and explaining his actions, he will say, "I" did this or that, "I spoke with..." "She told me...", and so on. This is the way we speak, and explain things, and I believe that it is only proper to write a police report in the same manner. Police reports are about events that have occurred. If a police officer is taking a police report then he has become involved in the event. It makes no sense to me to try to detach the officer from those events if he has become a part of it.

Capital Letters

Another problem I see frequently in report narratives is the use of all capital letters. Many officers have the mistaken impression that using "all Caps" makes the report look more official. Unfortunately, what this does is just make the report more difficult to read. A complete narrative using all capital letters is very monotonous and distracting. It tends to cause the reader to want to hurry through the report, potentially missing important information, and not understanding the gist of the report. It is just not very pleasing to the reader, and I discourage people from writing this way whenever I can.

Spelling and Grammar

What kind of impression would it make on those who must decide the guilt or innocence of a suspect if they were to find that the police report is full of misspelled words and grammatical errors? How does this reflect on the officer that prepared the report, and is supposed to be a knowledgeable and highly trained professional, especially if he is alleged to have a college degree? Those who read the report may believe that the author was either uneducated or did not really care about what he was writing, which would indicate that he didn't care about the crime itself, the victim or the suspect. One might believe that the officer was just plain stupid. This then, reflects negatively on not only the officer, but his superiors as well, and perhaps, the entire police department.

The English language is a very complicated one made up of many different words from other languages. Each of these languages has its own rules for pronunciation and spelling. The results are often confusing to say the least, and provide legitimacy to the notion that even many very intelligent people have difficulty spelling. Bennett and Hess (1998, p. 131) give a perfect example of these differences as they discuss seven words containing the letters *ough*, each having its own sound: *dough*, *bought*, *bough*, *rough*, *through*, *thorough* and *hiccough*. What other language does this play on pronunciations as much as English? Well it truly is no wonder that people have such a problem with spelling.

I often instruct my subordinates to carry a small dictionary with them, and to use it. A dictionary will not only give you the correct spelling of a word, but it can also tell you its pronunciation, whether it should be capitalized, and how to abbreviate it. Hess and Wroblewski (1996, p. 131) have come up with 76 of the most frequently misspelled words in police reports (see Figure 7). I have added this list to my What's The Problem? report that I provide to my subordinates. After reading countless police reports over the years I have come up with several additional words that I have added to this list: Amphetamine, Aggravated, Chief, Driver's License, License, Maneuver, Necessary, Paraphernalia, Receive and Separate. As I observe a pattern of certain misspelled words over time, those too will end up on the list.

Figure 7 Most Frequently Misspelled Words in Police Reports

Abduction	Defendant	Offense	Strangulation
Accelerated	Dispatched	Official	Subpoena
Accessories	Disposition	Pedestrian	Suicide
Accident	Drunkenness	Penalize	Summons
Acquitted	Embezzlement	Possession	Surrender
Affidavit	Emergency	Precinct	Surveillance
Altercation	Evidence	Premises	Suspect
Apparatus	Extortion	Prosecute	Suspicion
Arson	Forcible	Prostitution	Testimony
Assaulted	Fraudulent	Pursuit	Thief
Bureau	Homicide	Resistance	Thieves
Burglary	Indict	Robbery	Traffic
Coercion	Interrogate	Sabotage	Trespassing
Commission	Intimidation	Scene	Truancy
Complainant	Intoxication	Seize	Vagrancy
Conspiracy	Investigation	Sentence	Victim
Conviction	Juvenile	Sergeant	Warrant
Corpse	Larceny	Serious	
Counterfeit	Legal	Sheriff	
Criminal	Lieutenant	Statute	

Handwriting Vs. Typing

As I have already mentioned, it is very important for police officers to consider who will be reading these police reports after they are written. Of course, it goes without saying that due to the gravity of many police reports, they must be legible. In an ideal situation all police reports would, if not should, be typed. Unfortunately, this is quite often not possible. Many officers prefer to hand write their reports. Many simply cannot type, or are so unfamiliar with typing that to do so would profoundly interfere with the amount of time an officer needs to spend on patrol activities. If you must handwrite a report, make certain that it is neat and legible.

At one time, the Fort Smith Police Department required all police reports of any real significance to be typed. This included every offense, arrest and accident report, as well as any supplemental investigations. A requirement such as this would mean that a large percentage of an officer's shift was spent away from his patrol district or beat, and in front of a typewriter pecking away at the keys, proving to be a very inefficient method of handling the continuing problems on the officer's beat.

It was decided some years ago that our officers would be allowed to submit handwritten reports, which would eventually be entered into a computer system by civilian employees. I have encountered several problems with this method. Many officers simply scribble their reports out as quickly as possible. They write incomplete thoughts, use slang terms, police jargon, no punctuation and improper grammar, all of the things I've been discussing, then expect

that one of the data entry employees will, "clean it all up in the end." Another problem with this method is that the accident report will not be rewritten into a computer by data entry. The submitted report is the finished product, and an officer that has become too lazy to write an offense report well, does not suddenly repent when it comes to writing an accident report. Remember the example given earlier during the discussion about accident reports? However the finished product is presented, it should be easily read.

Computers have made a significant impact on report writing. Word processing software that contains spelling and grammar checkers, a number of interesting fonts and font sizes assist even those who have difficulty writing in producing much better reports. I prefer this method of report writing, as I know that my own handwriting and spelling skills are somewhat lacking. It is also much easier to change information as it is being typed, as well as afterward, and you still end up with a much nicer and neater finished product.

Much has been written over the years in an effort to teach people how to write well. Most basic police training deals with some form and quantity of report writing information, and there are many texts that contain lengthy sections on the subject. The items I have discussed in this paper outline some of the very basic information, and problems I see regularly, relating to the written police report. Like others, I could go on and on, but when it comes to teaching my subordinates how and why to improve their report writing skills, this is the information I try to provide them. I reiterate often: Consider your audience, construct a rough draft before writing

the final narrative, tell the story chronologically, use proper spelling and grammar, don't leave out important details, and if you must hand write it, do so neatly and legibly. I also instruct officer to read their reports after they have written them. Read it word for word. Allow a coworker to read it. Often times we can "read in" our own meaning, but others see the report for what is written. It is often easier for others to find missing or misspelled words.

There was a time when all you really had to do to be a police officer was to know right from wrong and handle yourself well enough in a fight to get the bad guy to jail. I recall hearing older police officers telling tales of the types of reports they submitted back then. "Met drunk, arrested same." "Subject stated he wouldn't go to jail without a fight. Subject in jail at time of this report!" Well times have changed, and so has police work. The job requires a much more knowledgeable police officer. One who can still handle himself in a fight, and can still get the bad guy to jail, but must make certain that it is done correctly, within the boundaries of the law, and all elements of the event recorded properly. A person's guilt or innocence may rely on information either given or not given in these records, and there may be plenty of people out there searching for those weak links. This is why I continue to stress the importance of the police report.

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