



San Diego County Sheriff

Training Bulletin

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Report Writing Basics

Most deputies underestimate the importance of their reports. It is important to remember as the investigation of a case is concerned, **YOU ARE WHAT YOU WRITE IN YOUR REPORTS - NO MORE AND NO LESS**. Great investigators and "testifiers" have often been made to appear incompetent because they failed to take the time to write clear and accurate reports . . . and because they failed to review them before going to court.

Police reports are used to record facts into a permanent record, to provide coordination of follow-up activities and investigative leads, and to provide a basis for prosecution. In addition, they are used by the defense for impeachment and provide a source for evaluation, statistical data and reference material. Characteristics of a good report include accuracy, conciseness, completeness, clarity, factualness and timeliness. Words should be accurately spelled and the text should be grammatically correct.

It is difficult to focus on report writing at the end of a long day. It is crucial to the success of the case that you think clearly in order to write a well written report. A deputy's ability to clearly document the facts and activities of an investigation not only reflects on the deputy's own professionalism, but also on the ability of the justice system to prosecute the criminal case.

An **investigative report** is a written document prepared by a deputy that records in detail the deputy's observations and actions as they relate to a specific event or incident. Each investigative report is a legal document that becomes a permanent written record of that event or incident. A deputy's report must present each event or incident in a complete and clear manner. Any investigation, arrest, prosecution, or other action taken must be initiated, supported, or justified by the information included in the report written by that deputy. Because a deputy's report is vital to the judicial process, each one must be able to stand up to critical review and legal scrutiny.

No matter what type of investigative report is being written (i.e., arrest report, incident report, etc.) that report must be:

- Factual
- Accurate
- Clear
- Concise
- Complete
- Timely

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Factual: Critical decisions are made based on a deputy's investigative report. Users of the report must have an exact and literal representation of the event or incident. The factual report provides an *objective* accounting of the relevant facts related to the event or incident under investigation. Any conclusions made by the reporting deputy must be based on *objective facts*. These facts must be articulated and documented within the body of the report.

Accurate: The decisions made and actions taken by the users of the report must be supported by accurate information. There must be *no inconsistencies or discrepancies* between what took place and what is documented in the deputy's report. If any specific information is found to be inaccurate, the credibility and reliability of the report itself may be jeopardized. Accuracy is achieved by carefully, precisely, impartially, and honestly recording all relevant information.

Clear: An investigative report must speak for the investigating deputy at a time when that deputy is not present. There should be no doubt or confusion on what the investigating deputy is reporting.

Complete: A deputy's report must contain all the relevant information and facts the user of that report will need. If the user must contact the writer to gather additional information, the report is not complete.

Concise: A deputy's report must straightforward and to the point. Do not embellish or add filler to the narrative of your report. The report should not be filled with unnecessary jargon or opinions.

Timely: No decisions can be made or an action taken if a deputy's report does not reach the users in a timely fashion. Evidence can be lost, suspects or witnesses may disappear, and the support and good will in the community can be lost if action toward resolving a case is delayed.

Every event or incident is different; therefore, the facts and information the deputy must gather will differ. A deputy's field notes should contain the facts and information that will aid that deputy in answering the questions what, when, where, who, how, and why.

Reports should contain original thought and accuracy. Deputies should avoid copying and pasting other narratives into their reports. The use of "boiler plate" reports can make a writer complacent and lead to poor report writing habits. As Nathaniel Hawthorne once said, "**Accuracy is the twin brother of honesty; inaccuracy, of dishonesty.**"

Stay Safe!