

BASIC POLICE REPORT WRITING

A Monograph in
THE POLICE SCIENCE SERIES

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BASIC POLICE REPORT WRITING

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Dedicated to my aunt, Mrs. Ed Snead

FOREWORD

ON AN OPERATIONAL LEVEL, the ability to describe a fugitive in a word picture that is a graphic representative of reality means prompt and rapid apprehension of criminals; sufficient aptitude to include all the essential elements of a crime in the few words of a court complaint means the people of the community will have an opportunity to convict a suspect of the crime charged; and the skill to sketch a police incident of today in some depth may mean the solution of tomorrow's crime.

On an administrative level, the words of police officers form the reports that make up the raw data whose compilation and study permits management to exercise the necessary control for the expert and efficient administration of a police unit.

In this text the qualities of factual prose necessary for police reports are thoroughly explained in an anatomical study of the mechanics of police report writing. Dr. Gammage sums up, without the waste of a single word, the selection and use of words, the structure of sentences, and the development of paragraphs. Almost in passing, he tells his readers of suitable stopping places in their reports as he presents simple principles on the art of punctuation.

A police officer, student, and teacher, Dr. Gammage writes with the authority of the lecture platform supported by years of experience as a working policeman. An excellent combination to launch new procedures in ferreting out facts during field note taking, and detailing methods for recording them in a manner which permits the officer to marshal his facts according to a definite plan when he must report the incident and describe the police action taken.

I believe the author's instructional material on the collection, selection, and arrangement of material in police reports is realistically keyed to the learning level of the great mass of policemen

and is the finest available material for police training officers and policemen interested in self-improvement.

Dr. Gammage has recognized and apparently solved the legitimate claims of both the formal and the informal levels of language usage and is to be complimented on the fact that he has avoided the dogmatic narrowness of the prescriptive grammarians, though he has provided the police profession with a text which is not only instructional, but which will also serve as a ready reference to the appropriateness and correctness of the various forms of police reports, and the language used in their preparation.

A Texan by birth and avocation, Dr. Gammage preaches the doctrine of direct sentences, for "telling 'em straight." This text is not a grammar book, though grammatical errors are detailed and some grammar introduced to show why such errors hinder the successful communication of ideas. In hard-hitting "plain talk" the author explains the parts of speech and the relation of writing to thinking. He also explores the need for developing a style of writing which will reflect an officer's thinking in order that he may tell a story which subordinates the minor phases of an incident or police action and hits the reader right between the eyes with the main idea.

The emerging police profession may also erect another mile post since this book standardizes the methodology of police reports. Dr. Gammage has established national standards against which to evaluate the prevailing practices of an individual policeman or a police department. The author has studied the standard practices of the top police units in the United States, both large and small, and questioned police officers of all ranks who have qualified as experts by field experience. Therefore, it can be safely stated that this book is an authoritative reproduction of accepted report writing procedures in reasonably prudent police departments.

PAUL B. WESTON
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PREFACE

IN THE AUTHOR'S PERSONAL experience and as the result of interviews and discussions with people in the police field, he is convinced that one of the greatest voids in the police procedures field is in the area of police report writing. Police practitioners at the performance level continue to struggle with their reports. Administrators express a high degree of dissatisfaction with the routine reports submitted. Most interested parties agree that the deficiencies stem from a lack of knowledge of the fundamentals on the part of the report writer. They also state that almost all recruit and refresher courses offered in the academies fail to accomplish the job of preparing police personnel in the art of report writing.

This manual was written with the hope that it will solve some of the problems of both the practitioner and administrator as they relate to operational reporting. The author makes no claim that this manual is a panacea, but he is convinced that thorough study and application of the presented principles and procedures will cause the reader to become a better report writer.

The introduction is designed to acquaint the reader with the purposes, values, and principles involved in the preparation of reports. It is an effort to sell the practising officer the idea that in submitting superior reports he not only is doing a professional job for his department, but is contributing to his own professional growth.

Part II is a guide to improve diction, spelling, capitalization, abbreviations, sentence structure, punctuation and paragraphing because it is inability in relation to these mechanical aspects that the average police report often falls short of the ideal.

The third part deals with form preparation. The forms utilized are the result of study of many in current use and are those developed with a view to emphasizing the desirability of narrative presentations. Beginning with field note taking as the foundation

of operational reports, the reader is taken through the entire process from the recording of a reported incident to the many specialized forms used in reporting investigations, arrests and the identification of persons and property.

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Last, but not least, thanks to Professor Nicholas DeLucia who provided the photographs and Miss Lois Mouchett who worked so faithfully in typing the manuscript.

A.Z.G.

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BASIC POLICE REPORT WRITING

PART I
INTRODUCTION

Chapter I

DEFINITIONS, PURPOSES, AND TYPES OF POLICE REPORTS

WEBSTER'S NEW COLLEGIATE Dictionary defines a report as an account of some subject specially investigated or an official statement of facts. According to this definition, police reports may be written or oral; they may be detailed or brief; they may be simple or complex; they may be prepared by anyone in the department from the chief to the patrolman on the beat. In any event, police reporting has become one of the most significant processes in modern police operations. Reports result from the fact that someone has asked for them and needs them for immediate or future use. They are made to be read and used.

The larger the police department, of course, the greater the demand for reports. This is true because more information of different kinds is required and because more people are at different places where things are happening. The chief of a large department finds it necessary to have a greater division of labor, to hire more employees, to delegate more activities to subordinates, to supervise a greater number of people, and often to watch over a larger area.

Yet, any chief is responsible for all of the basic activities of his department. He must know what is going on throughout his agency; and, in all departments, large or small, the principal way to determine what is going on is to require reports, to use proper reporting procedures, and to utilize the results.

In fact, the field of police reporting, broadly interpreted, is the field of police communications. At whatever point work is divided and delegated, the process of reporting begins. At whatever point policy is formulated or modified, the process of reporting is a "must." In government generally, as well as in police agencies, the matter of communicating is complex and presents a continuing problem. All sorts of information must, of course, flow upward and

downward through the department; but, in addition, and equally important in many cases, information must somehow be reported outward, across, and around. The setting of police reporting, then, is the entire field of communications. This means that the process of police reporting has at its disposal all of the ways and means available in the broader field. This includes oral and written techniques and all of the known media developed for the exchange of information and ideas. But police experience indicates that written communication, in most cases, is the most effective; and, in any case, it is the form of communication which presents greater problems for the department and the reporter.

PURPOSES OF REPORTS

In general, a police agency develops its reporting system to serve four key purposes: (1) to account upward and outward for its activities and for the justification of its program; (2) to report upward and outward information concerning progress, future needs and plans, and decisions being made or which may be made; (3) to report upward for purposes of administrative control; and (4) to inform downward in the organization concerning policies, program, organization resources, procedures, and all other matters concerning the work in the agency.

In reporting upward and outward the police agency takes into account the police organization itself; the mayor or city manager; the city council; the central government-wide service agencies, such as the department of finance and the civil service commission; and the general public. In reporting downward in the organization the department must take into consideration all of the levels of responsibility and any special units or staffs which need to be kept informed of matters contained in a given report. In any of these situations a report may serve the useful purpose of interpreting facts, transmitting information, analyzing problems or situations, educating employees and others, accounting to superior authority, or controlling within the department itself.

TYPES OF POLICE REPORTS

In fact, the many purposes served by police reports and our system of administrative independence have given rise to a number

and variety of reports which, in some departments, are actually appalling. As a result, the job of conducting a systematic discussion of police reports is almost impossible. But, speaking in broad terms and in a rather elementary way, we may classify all police reports into two groups: informal and formal.

An informal report usually is a letter or memorandum or any one of many prescribed or used in day-by-day police operations. It customarily carries three items besides the text proper: date submitted, subject, and persons or person to whom submitted. It may, however, contain many items of administrative importance along with the subject matter of the text. Actually, most police reports may be placed in this category.

A formal report suggests the full-dress treatment, including cover, title page, letter of transmittal, summary sheet, text, appendixes, and perhaps an index and bibliography.

Another helpful plan for classifying police reports is based on the purpose of the report. Under this plan, any police report may be classified as either a performance, fact-finding, technical, problem-determining, or problem-solution report. The *performance report* contains information as to the status of an activity, activities, or operations. The *fact-finding* report involves the gathering and presentation of data in logical order, without an attempt to draw conclusions. A *technical report* presents data on a specialized subject. The *problem-determining report* attempts to find the causes underlying a problem or to find whether or not a problem really exists. The *problem-solution report* analyzes the thought process that lies behind the solution of a particular problem. It may include all of the elements found in the other types of reports, including presentation of data collected, discussion of possible solutions to the problem, and an indication of the best solution.

On the other hand, these rather informative classifications offer very little help in establishing a systematic arrangement of a veritable mass of police reports. Let's speak in more specific terms. For our purposes, police reports may be categorized as operational reports, internal business reports, technical reports, and summary reports.

Operational reports include those relating to the reporting of police incidents, investigations, arrests, identification of per-