

Writing Effective Incident Reports

tips for writing reports that are accurate and professional

a special publication from Firebelle Productions

Introduction

Reports serve as a permanent record of incidents, events, problems, and so forth. There are many types of reports, each of which serves different functions. Some are used to keep people informed of activities within the department. Some are used to compile statistical information, identify problems in the community, or identify department training needs. Some reports are needed to facilitate investigations, prepare court cases, or defend cases in court.

It is beyond the scope of this publication to elaborate on the different types of reports used in the emergency response field or on the report-writing process itself. That information needs to come from your particular agency. However, this publication will briefly touch on the importance of well-written reports and the characteristics of a good report.

The Importance of Well-Written Reports

Poorly written reports hurt your credibility by making you appear less competent and professional. They can also undermine your goals in a number of ways. A poorly written report can cause you to lose a case in court, perhaps resulting in a criminal being set free to kill, rape, steal, or commit arson again. Poorly written reports can make it difficult to accurately identify training and equipment needs. They can result in failure to take appropriate follow-up action on a problem. And those are just a few examples.

Just as important as content are grammar, punctuation, spelling, and word choice. Something as simple as improperly using or omitting a comma can change the meaning of a sentence. So can using a wrong word. It's not uncommon in a court of law for attorneys to attack the credibility of a witness by displaying a report on screen for all to see and pointing out all the errors in grammar, spelling, and so forth. The strategy is to cast doubt on the witness's competency and professionalism. "If the witness is this careless in writing his report, how can we trust that he was accurate, thorough, and attentive to detail when conducting his investigation?"

Reports must be well-written.

Poorly written reports can hurt your credibility.



A poorly written report can cause you to lose a case in court.

Poorly written reports can undermine your goals in numerous other ways as well

Your reports can also have unintended consequences for the public we serve. Consider a workplace injury where firefighters or paramedics incorrectly document information given to them by the patient. Consequently, Workers' Compensation denies the patient's claim because of what was written in the patient contact report. Fighting to get those benefits restored will be a nightmare for the patient, all because someone failed to be clear, accurate, or specific in a report.

Well-written reports require some effort. They should not be something you merely throw together between calls. You should carefully review and edit each report before filing it or forwarding it to your supervisor. Consider reviewing the report with your crew before submitting it. Make sure it accurately reflects what each crew member did.

Good and Bad Characteristics

Common Problems with Incident Reports

The following are common problems found in incident reports:

- Confusing to someone who wasn't there (report doesn't paint a clear picture)
- Thoughts not presented in an organized manner
- Not enough detail (*who, what, when, where, why, and how*)
- Not clear and concise
- Poor grammar, punctuation, and spelling
- Incorrect word usage
- Use of terms, abbreviations, and acronyms that readers may not be familiar with
- Inconsistency in style throughout the department

Inconsistency in style throughout the department is not necessarily bad or wrong. However, it can become a problem if the inconsistency makes it more difficult for supervisors to review the reports or analyze concerns department-wide.

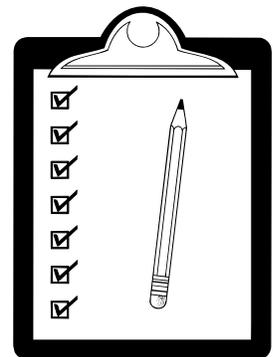
Characteristics of a Good Report

The following are characteristics of a good report:

- Accurate and specific
- Factual
- Objective
- Clear
- Complete
- Concise
- Well-organized
- Grammatically correct
- Light on abbreviations

Each of these characteristics is addressed in more detail on the following pages.

A good report is accurate and specific, factual, objective, clear, complete, and concise.



It is also well-organized, grammatically correct, and light on abbreviations.

A Good Report Is Accurate and Specific

Emergency responders do not have much room for error in the field. The mistakes we make can mean the difference between life and death for the citizens we serve, as well as for ourselves and our coworkers.

Reports are a little different. You can type the wrong number when documenting a drug dosage, for example, without killing your patient. But the error can come back to haunt you later when your supervisor, the patient's family, or an attorney wants to know why you administered the wrong dosage. Some errors are not discovered until years later when a case goes to court. By that time, you may have forgotten the details of the case. Even if you do remember the correct information, your credibility will suffer when you have to admit you made a mistake in your report. It raises questions about how many other errors you made.

Many inaccuracies are due to simple spelling errors and typos. Spell-check your reports. Double-check dates, times, names, phone numbers, etc. Proof your documents carefully, and have others proof your documents as appropriate. It's often a good idea to set a document aside for a day or two, if you have that flexibility, then proof it again. Often you will see problems you missed before.

Being accurate also means being specific. Vague references do not give readers much information, and they can mean different things to different people. What is a "high fever," for example? When you are specific, everyone can come to the same understanding.

Vague: The patient had a high fever.
Specific: The patient had a fever of 103°F.

A Good Report Is Factual

Well-written reports are factual. There's a difference, by the way, between accurate and factual. A *fact* is something real that can be either proved or disproved. *The fire destroyed nine homes* is a statement of fact. However, further investigation may show that the fire destroyed three homes and six outbuildings. The first statement was found to be inaccurate, but it was a statement of fact versus an inference or opinion.

An *inference* is a conclusion based on reasoning. It becomes sound or believable if supported by facts.

Inference: We suspected that he was driving under the influence, because we could smell alcohol on his breath and because his speech was slurred.
Fact: Blood tests confirmed he had a blood alcohol level that was twice the legal limit.

A fact is something real that can be either proved or disproved.



An inference is a conclusion based on reasoning. It becomes sound or believable if supported by facts.

An *opinion* is a belief. It may or may not be appropriate to include opinions in your report. However, if you do include them, you should clearly identify them as such.

Fact: The driver had a blood alcohol level that was twice the legal limit.

Opinion: The patient has a problem with alcohol.

A Good Report Is Objective

Objective reports are fair and impartial, not influenced by emotion or opinion. One key to being objective is to avoid words whose connotations change the tone of the report.

Subjective: The man attacked an *old bag lady*.

Objective: The man attacked an *elderly homeless woman*.

An objective report includes both sides of the story and does not favor one side or another. The first account below is objective. However, the second and third are biased to favor the wife and husband, respectively. Only the first one is appropriate.

Objective: Several witnesses reported hearing the couple arguing about money. Mr. Reilly allegedly hit his wife in the face during the argument. We found Mrs. Reilly with a bloody nose and a swollen cheek.

Biased: Numerous witnesses reported that the couple had been fighting because Mr. Reilly couldn't hold down a job. Mr. Reilly slugged his wife in the face because he was furious that she brought up the subject. We found Mrs. Reilly with severe injuries to the face, including a bloody nose and a badly swollen cheek.

Biased: Several witnesses reported that the couple had been arguing because Mrs. Reilly kept nagging her husband about being laid off. Mrs. Reilly became so hostile that her husband momentarily lost control and slapped her in the face. Mrs. Reilly claimed to have been badly beaten, but she had only a little bit of blood beneath her nose and a slightly red cheek.

Statements from patients, witnesses, and other people may not be objective. However, when you include those statements in your reports, you need to make it clear that you are quoting someone else.

Statements from victims, witnesses, and responsible parties may not be objective.



However, when you include those statements in your report, make it clear that you are quoting someone else.

A Good Report Is Complete

A well-written report is complete. It covers the *who, what, where, when, why,* and *how*. It does not leave unanswered questions. For example, don't stop with who the victim was and who responded to the call. Include who discovered the incident, who reported it, who witnessed it, whom you talked to during your investigation, who marked and received the evidence, other people whom you notified, and so on as appropriate.

How much detail is appropriate for a given report depends largely on the incident and your department's policies. Consider, also, how the report may be used in the future. Will it be used in court someday? If so, anticipate that attorneys for both sides will examine the report closely. You should anticipate being questioned about every detail, including some details that are not in the report. The more information you put in the report, the less you have to rely on memory and the more credibility you have in the courtroom.

Remember the old adage: *If it isn't documented, it didn't happen*. Imagine, for example, a medical call where the patient suffers a spinal injury that leaves him paralyzed. When this incident goes to court, as you can predict it will, questions are raised as to whether the care rendered by emergency personnel contributed to the paralysis. The fire captain wrote in his narrative that firefighters assessed the patient and provided basic life support, then transferred care to paramedics upon their arrival. Where in that short summary does it say that firefighters provided spinal immobilization? It may have been done, but if it isn't documented, it may become a very uncomfortable point of contention in the courtroom.

How else might the report be used someday? Will you need the information to show a trend in your city? Will you need to compare the circumstances of this incident with another one that might be related? If there are details you may need in the future, include them in the report.

Who else may read your report? Investigators? City officials? Insurance companies? Your agency's attorney? Others? What information will they need? Be sure your report covers those details too.

Realize that these many of these reports are public documents and, as such, may be read by people you may not be thinking about when you write your report. For example, an author or journalist working on a book or news story might dig into public records for details about the incident or the people involved. Is there anything in your report that will later embarrass you or your agency?

This leads to the question of what to do with details that shouldn't be made public. For example, HIPAA laws prohibit releasing confidential patient information. However, the details must be documented somewhere. So the reports need to be structured in such a way that confidential information is restricted to documents that aren't accessible to the public.

Later in this newsletter are two sections that provide additional guidelines on being complete. You can use these to trigger your thinking as you write your reports.

**A good report covers six important questions:
Who? What?
Where? When?
Why? and How?**



**Remember,
if it isn't
documented, it
didn't happen.**

A Good Report Is Concise

It may seem contradictory to say that a report should be both complete and concise. However, being concise does not mean leaving out important details. Rather, it means using words economically and omitting words that do not add value. Your documents should be free of the excessive wordiness that interferes with readability.

- Wordy:* The engine company that arrived first on scene immediately began operations to search the first floor of the hotel and rescue anyone who might be trapped.
- Concise:* The first-in engine company immediately began search and rescue operations on the first floor of the hotel.

A Good Report Is Well-Organized

Poorly organized reports can leave readers feeling lost and confused, so it's important that reports be well-organized.

The best way to organize information will depend somewhat on the type of report and the complexity of the situation. A simple incident report might work best if organized in chronological order. An inspection report, on the other hand, might flow better if organized by type of violation (e.g., blocked exits in three areas) or by location (e.g., problems noted room-by-room).

A fire investigation report might require a combination approach. It may need a chronological account of what happened, then separate sections to address cause-and-origin analysis, evidence collected, statements from witnesses, and so forth.

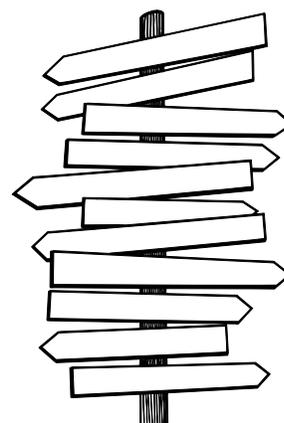
A Good Report Is Clear

A clear report is one that can be easily understood and that contains no ambiguities. If different people can read the same report and come up with different interpretations, the report is not clear.

Provide specific details. As already indicated, vague references do not give readers much information. The more details you provide, the clearer the incident will be to readers. Look at the first example below. What does *overcrowded* mean? Who says the balcony was overcrowded? The first sentence is unclear because it leaves too much open to interpretation.

- Vague:* The balcony collapsed because it was overcrowded.
- Clear:* The wooden balcony collapsed because it was overloaded. Structural engineers confirmed that it was designed to hold a maximum of eight people. Several witnesses said there were at least fifteen people on the balcony when it collapsed.

Poorly organized reports can leave readers feeling lost and confused.



Reports must be clear, unambiguous, and well-organized.

Use diagrams, sketches, and photographs as appropriate to help illustrate the scene, and make sure the information in your report is consistent with what is depicted in your visual aids.

A Good Report Is Grammatically Correct

Many of the errors made in report writing are errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and word choice. Errors in grammar and punctuation can affect both the clarity and accuracy of your report. They also make you look less professional. As indicated earlier in this newsletter, this can be a source of great embarrassment in the courtroom.

It's beyond the scope of this newsletter to go into depth on how to write a grammatically correct report. However, let's look at a couple examples of common problems. Sometimes the use or omission of a comma can change the meaning of the sentence. Read the two examples below.

Essential: The second patient *who was transported to Community General Hospital* had third-degree burns on his hands and arms.

Nonessential: The second patient, *who was transported to Community General Hospital*, had third-degree burns on his hands and arms.

In the first sentence, the words printed in italics are essential to the meaning of the sentence. The first sentence refers to the second of two or more patients who were transported to Community General.

In the second sentence, the words are nonessential; they can be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence. This sentence identifies the second of two or more patients treated, not necessarily the second patient sent to Community General. The first patient may be have been sent elsewhere.

Notice that the words in each sentence of the above examples are the same. The only difference between the sentences is the use or omission of commas.

The following example is something called a *dangling modifier*. The introductory phrase does not clearly modify the subject. It appears as if the officers, not the drunk driver, were weaving in and out of traffic.

Wrong: Weaving in and out of traffic, we suspected the man was driving under the influence.

Right: Because he was weaving in and out of traffic, we suspected the man was driving under the influence.

Use the active voice as much as possible. There are two voices in the English language: active and passive. The active voice emphasizes the one doing the action, while the passive voice emphasizes the person or thing being acted upon. The active voice is generally clearer, more powerful, more interesting, and more concise than the passive voice. Plus, as illustrated in the following example, the whodunit is often omitted when sentences are written in the passive voice.

**Errors in
grammar and
punctuation
can affect both
the clarity and
accuracy of
your report.**



**Even something
as simple as the
use or omission
of a comma
can change the
meaning of the
sentence.**

Active: The patient's wife was doing CPR when we arrived.

Passive: CPR was being performed prior to our arrival.

Correct spelling and word choice are also important. A typo that isn't caught by spell-checkers can change the meaning of a sentence. For example, spell-checkers won't identify if you've mistakenly identified that a patient suffers from hypotension rather than hypertension.

Other mistakes are less critical. However, when you confuse such words as *its* and *it's* or *accept* and *except*, it hurts your credibility and distracts from the content of your message.

Grammar, punctuation, and spelling may not be among your strengths, but they're vital towards writing a good report.

A Good Report Is Light on Abbreviations

Some abbreviations are acceptable in almost any document. It's certainly appropriate to use *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, and *Dr.* instead of spelling the words out. Long and cumbersome expressions are commonly abbreviated in all but the most formal writing. For example, it's acceptable to use *AIDS* instead of *acquired immune deficiency syndrome*. It's easier for both the writer and the reader. Standard abbreviations that facilitate reading are also acceptable in all but the most formal reading. Examples include *psi*, *gpm*, and *mph*.

Certain abbreviations may be acceptable in one application but not in others. For example, paramedics can use the abbreviation *pt.* for *patient* in patient contact reports. However, it would be inappropriate to use that abbreviation in ordinary writing. Don't abbreviate out of laziness.

Many experts recommend minimizing the use of abbreviations in ordinary writing. Using too many abbreviations or using them inappropriately can detract from your message and give readers the impression that you do not know how to write.

Use the active voice as much as possible.

The whodunit is often omitted when sentences are written in the passive voice.



Using too many abbreviations or using them inappropriately can detract from your message.

Whodunit? Whatdunit? and So Forth

The importance of being complete was addressed earlier in the newsletter. However, the following pages contain ideas of things you may want to cover when hitting the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how*. Obviously, the emphasis placed on each of these questions will vary based on the type of incident and how involved it is, but these ideas can stimulate your thinking.

Who?

- Who was directly involved? (Who was injured? Who experienced the release? And so forth.)
- Who discovered the incident?
- Who reported the incident?
- Who witnessed the incident? Who saw or heard something important?
- Whom did you talk with while on scene or while investigating the incident?
- Who responded to the incident?
- Who took what actions?
- Who is the responsible party?
- Who was in possession of the property at the time of the incident? (This may be different from the responsible party.)
- Whom was notified of the incident? (Did you call parents, an insurance company, or other agencies?)
- Who is the insurance carrier?
- Who collected, marked, and received evidence?
- Whom did you turn the patient or property over to?

What?

- What happened? (Include type of incident and enough details to paint a picture of the incident.)
- What property was involved and to what extent?
- What was the patient's chief complaint?
- What actions did you take?
- What were the results of your actions?
- What automatic systems were involved (alarm systems, sprinkler systems, airbags, etc.)?
- What was said?
- What evidence was found, photographed, and/or collected?
- What hazards were you and your crew exposed to?
- What unusual circumstances did you encounter en route, on scene, or after leaving?
- What equipment was used?
- What equipment was damaged or contaminated?
- What equipment must be repaired or replaced?
- What warnings did you provide the responsible party before you left?
- What follow-up is required?

Make sure you identify whodunit and whatdunit.



Be sure to identify inconsistencies, such as differences between the call you were dispatched to and what you found on your arrival.

Where?

- Where did the incident occur? Is this the same location to which you were dispatched?
- Where did the incident go if it extended beyond the point of origin, and what exposures were affected?
- Where were patients found? Is this the same location to which you were dispatched?
- Where else did/must investigators look? Is there a secondary scene? Is there a need to search another location associated with the suspect or victim?
- Where did the reporting party call from?
- Where did you search for evidence?
- Where was evidence found?
- Where do responsible parties and other key people live/work?
- Where did you make entry into the building?

When?

- When did the incident happen?
- When was the incident discovered and reported? (Were there delays?)
- When did emergency responders arrive on scene?
- When did other agencies arrive?
- When was the incident brought under control?
- When will follow-up activities take place?

Why?

- Why did the incident occur? Was it accidental or intentional? What factors contributed to the incident?
- Why did you take the actions you did? (This is particularly important if you deviated from SOPs or if anything unusual happened.)

How?

- How did the incident occur?
- How was the incident discovered?
- How is this incident related to other incidents (if applicable)?
- How was evidence collected?
- How were samples collected?
- How was information obtained?

Elements of a Complete Report

The following are other guidelines on things to include. This section includes some overlap with the previous pages. However, it also includes many items not previously addressed. The information needed for a report will vary somewhat based on the type of incident, and how the information is presented will vary depending on the forms you use in your agency. However, these pages can be used to help trigger your thinking.

If appropriate, identify why you took the actions that you did.



This is particularly important if you deviated from SOPs or if anything unusual happened.

Nature and Extent of Emergency (Both Actual and Reported)

Describe the nature and extent of the emergency. If there was a discrepancy between what you were dispatched to and what you found on your arrival, be sure to document that. Provide sufficient details for someone who was not there to develop a mental picture of the incident (e.g., a one-story, wood frame, single-family home with flames and smoke showing from the kitchen window on the right side of the house). Information covered in other parts of the report (e.g., the form section) does not have to be repeated in the narrative unless it makes the report clearer or easier to read.

Observations

What did you observe? Observations, like size-up, take place throughout the incident, so don't limit yourself to things observed only upon arrival. What did you see before your arrival (e.g., smoke showing from the station or someone seen fleeing from the scene as you approached)? Did you see anything later in the incident that might be significant?

Actions

What actions did you take to control the scene and mitigate the problem, and what were the results of your actions? Be specific, particularly where questions might arise later. "Treated the patient" is not specific. Who treated the patient? What treatment was rendered? What equipment did you use? Remember the old adage, If it isn't documented, it didn't happen.

Unusual Circumstances

Note anything out of the ordinary, particularly where evidence suggests this event may not be accidental. Did you notice signs of forced entry? Did fire protection equipment fail to function as it should? Did the fire spread in an unusual manner? Is there some connection between this incident and an earlier one? In high-profile incidents, particularly where there is loss of life or extensive losses to property or the environment, even little details can be important.

Property Damage

Describe what was damaged, as well as the type and extent of damage (e.g., heavy fire damage in the garage and heavy smoke damage throughout the house). You don't need to identify specific contents damaged unless there are unusual circumstances (e.g., it appears someone forced the safe open and removed the contents prior to the fire). However, some departments typically ask their personnel to make an estimate of dollar loss on both property and contents.

Cause

Identify the cause if possible, and provide specific observations that led to your conclusion. If appropriate, particularly when the cause is undetermined, identify causes that have been ruled out based on your observations (e.g., power controls in the off position or appliance unplugged). If you don't yet know the cause because the incident has been turned over to someone else for investigation, document that.

Describe your observations and actions.



Describe any discrepancies or unusual circumstances.

Statements Provided by Others

If you take statements from victims, witnesses, family, friends, employers, etc., document those statements, along with names and phone numbers of individuals providing those statements.

Advice, Warnings, or Information You Provided

Document any advice, warnings, or other pertinent information you provided to victims, occupants, building owners, etc. Sometimes, as is the case with EMS calls, you may have specific forms for this (e.g., the AMA—against medical advice—form). Often, however, you will need to include such warnings as part of your narrative (e.g., advised plant manager to have an electrician check the wiring before restoring power).

Disposition

How did you leave the situation? In whose care did you leave the patient or property (e.g., patient was transported by AMR 314 to Community General, warehouse was turned over to the owner)? Did you refer the case to another person within your department (e.g., fire investigator) or to someone in another agency (e.g., County Health, FBI)? If so, get a name or badge number and telephone number. What notifications did you make (e.g., utility company, building department)? Did you turn anything on or off before you left (e.g., alarm system, electricity)?

Conclusion

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to writing reports. Guidelines vary depending on the type of report, how the report will be used, and individual agency preferences. However, this newsletter is designed to provide good information that applies to any report you might write.



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Author and Publisher
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If you can't identify what caused the problem, document any causes you have ruled out.



Document any advice, warnings, or other pertinent information you provided victims, occupants, etc.