Police Report Writing

The Face Page

Every police report includes a front or "face" page, which may include a section for writing a narrative or may require a separate page for the narrative section. The face page contains blocks where the officer enters basic information, such as the incident date, time, and location; the names and biographical information of a victim, witness, or suspect; the type of crime committed and the corresponding state statute number; and more. The information reported on the face page, though, is useful far beyond its application to the police investigation. This information is translated into data that are used by crime analysts, police managers, researchers, and criminal justice students to study national trends in crime. This chapter introduces students to the most common types of information reported on a face page, the uses for that data, and writing the report narrative.

Officers are required to write many different types of narrative documents. In policing, the basic incident report documents the officer's activity; records the actions and testimony of victims, suspects, and witnesses; serves as a legal account of an event; and is used for court testimony. As a professional, an officer should strive to become the best writer possible.

The need to write well has never been more important. Relating facts about an incident and investigation go far beyond the eyes of the supervisor and agency. Writing in general and writing well is a cornerstone of professional communication skills, and according to Lentz (2013) "is seen as a mark of professionalism and intelligence" (p. 475). Writing well is a necessary requirement in policing, and police officers are often expected to complete a variety of writing assignments. A well-written police report will convict criminals, encourage the support of the community, and become a guide by which the public and the courts will measure their respect for both the officer and department.

Additionally, police reports are public record in many states. As such, they are available for all to review. Attorneys, paralegals, and staff personnel on both sides of a case, as well as judges and journalists may read an officer's reports. Imagine a report being read by a Justice of the Supreme Court!

This chapter introduces students to the most common information reported on a face page and the uses for that data as well as information on writing the report narrative.

Common Data Fields

The specific data reported on the face page varies by individual agencies according to local needs and compliance with Uniform Crime Reporting program (UCR) and National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)

reporting requirements. According to NIBRS policies, every incident report must contain, at a minimum, the following segments: administrative, offense, property, victim, offender, and arrestee (FBI, n.d.c, p. 64).

The Administrative Segment contains information that applies to the entire incident. The police agency will generate a case number for all incident reports. The case number is reported on the initial incident report and all supplemental and investigative reports. All documents related to an incident will share the same agency case number. The date, time, and specific location of the offense are also reported in this segment (FBI, n.d.c, p. 65).

Offense Segment

The criminal offense title, such as burglary or robbery, and the corresponding state statute are reported in this segment, unless the case is civil or non-criminal. If the incident involved more than one offense, each additional offense should be listed as well (FBI, n.d.c, p. 65).
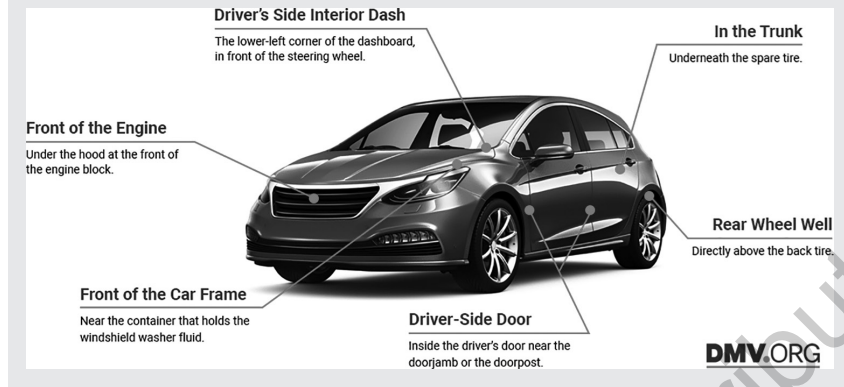
Property Segment

This segment includes a list of each item of property that is damaged, destroyed, recovered, seized, or stolen. The list should include a description of each property item and its value. In the case of drug seizures, the quantity and estimated street value should also be included (FBI, n.d.c, p. 65). Property items listed on the incident report face page are generally limited to less than 10 items reported as being stolen or missing.

Property items reported as stolen by a victim should be described and valued according to the victim's testimony. Items that have been found by an officer or stolen items that have been recovered will also be reported in this section of the report. Officers should be particularly cautious when describing jewelry and drug items if they are not trained and qualified to accurately identify precious metals, gemstones, street drugs, and pharmacological drugs. A gold ring may bear a stamp indicating 24k gold, a presumptive drug test may give a positive result for cocaine, and a pill may appear in the *Physician's Desk Reference*, but without the proper training and instruments, officers often cannot state with certainty that many items are, in fact, what they appear to be. A more detailed discussion on recording property items appears in Chapter 6 of this text.

If a vehicle is involved in a case, as much detailed information as possible is reported on the face page. This information includes make, model, year, and color. Any distinguishing characteristics, such as body damage and missing parts, should be noted. One of the authors once identified and arrested a bank robbery suspect after a bumper sticker described by a witness was observed on a vehicle the day after the robbery. Finally, if available, officers should note the vehicle identification number (VIN) and license plate state and number. If the vehicle has been stolen, this information may be located on the vehicle title, registration, and insurance documents. The VIN can be located in places on the vehicle. See Image 3.1, Where to Locate Your VIN.

The VIN can often be found on the lower-left corner of the dashboard, in front of the steering wheel. You can read the number by looking through the windshield. The VIN may also appear in a number of other locations:

Image 3.1   Where to Locate Your VIN

Driver's Side Interior Dash
The lower-left corner of the dashboard, in front of the steering wheel.

In the Trunk
Underneath the spare tire.

Front of the Engine
Under the hood at the front of the engine block.

Rear Wheel Well
Directly above the back tire.

Front of the Car Frame
Near the container that holds the windshield washer fluid.

Driver-Side Door
Inside the driver's door near the doorjamb or the doorpost.

DMV.ORG

Source: dmv.org

- **Front of the engine block**. This should be easy to spot by popping open the hood and looking at the front of the engine.

- **Front of the car frame**, near the container that holds windshield washer fluid.

- **Rear wheel well**. Try looking up, directly above the tire.

- **Inside the driver-side door jamb**. Open the door and look underneath where the side-view mirror would be located if the door was shut.

- **Driver-side doorpost**. Open the door and look near the spot where the door latches, not too far from the seatbelt return.

- **Underneath the spare tire**.

Victim, Offender, and Arrestee Segments

These segments include information about the people involved in an incident, including the victim, witness, offender, and arrestee. The name, biographical information, address, and contact information is reported for the victim and witness. As much information as is known about an offender should also be listed, including race, sex, height, weight, hair and eye color, and any distinguishing scars, marks, or tattoos. Many times, the suspect is not known, but a description can be included. The arrestee segment includes the date of arrest and charge as well as the arrestee's age, race, and sex (FBI, n.d.c, p. 65).

Many times, the person who reports the incident is also the victim, and there are no other persons involved. But in more involved cases and lengthy investigations, the list of persons can grow quite long. Additional persons may include several victims and witnesses, back-up officers and case investigators, medical personnel, transportation personnel, crime scene

technicians, investigators, and more. Officers should be diligent in identifying and reporting the information of those involved since prosecutors may find their testimony valuable during trial.

Two areas that deserve particular attention include race and sex. The modern changes to the definitions of racial and sexual identity can easily lead to errors in reporting this critical information. When completing the face page, officers should follow the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) guidelines listed in Figures 3.1 and 3.2 when reporting the race and sex of persons involved in an incident.

Figure 3.1 FBI Race Codes		
External Code	**Literal**	**Description (If Subject Is)**
A	Asian or Pacific Islander	Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Polynesian, Indian, Indonesian, Asian Indian, Samoan, or other Pacific Islander
B	Black	A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa
I	American Indian or Alaskan Native	American Indian, Eskimo, or Alaskan Native, or a person having origins in any of the 48 contiguous states of the United States or Alaska who maintains cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community recognition
U	Unknown	Of indeterminable race
W	White	Caucasian, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race

Source: The Guidelines for Preparation of Fingerprints Cards and Associated Criminal History Information, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Figure 3.2 FBI Sex Codes		
External Code	**Literal**	**Description**
F	Female	Female
G	Female	Female Print, Male Reference
M	Male	Male
N	Male	Male Print, Female Reference
Y	Male	Male, Unreported
Z	Female	Female, Unreported
X	Unknown	Unknown Sex

Source: The Guidelines for Preparation of Fingerprints Cards and Associated Criminal History Information, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Figure 3.3 Sample Incident Report Face Page

OFFENSE/INCIDENT REPORT

INSTRUCTIONS ARE PRINTED SEPARATELY. IF ADDITIONAL SPACE IS NEEDED, USE REVERSE OF FORM; IDENTIFY ITEMS.

1. TYPE
☐ a. ORIGINAL   ☐ b. CONTINUATION   ☐ c. SUPPLEMENT OR FOLLOWUP

2. CODE NO.	2a. SORT	3. TYPE OF OFFENSE OR INCIDENT	4. CASE CONTROL NUMBER

5. BUILDING NUMBER	6. ADDRESS

7. NAME OF AGENCY/BUREAU	8. AGENCY/BUREAU CODE	9. SPECIFIC LOCATION	10. LOCATION CODE

11a. DATE OF OFFENSE/INCIDENT	11a. TIME OF OFFENSE/INCIDENT	12. DAY	13a. DATE REPORTED	13b. TIME REPORTED	14. DAY

15. JURISDICTION (X)
☐ EXCLUSIVE   ☐ CONCURRENT   ☐ PARTIAL   ☐ PROPRIETARY

16. NO. OF DEMONSTRATORS	17. NO. EVACUATED	a. TIME START	b. TIME END

18. PERSONS INVOLVED

ID CODE (a)	NAME AND ADDRESS (b)	AGE (c)	SEX (d)	RACE (e)	INJURY CODE (f)	TELEPHONE (g)
	Last Name, First, Middle Initial					HOME
	Number, Street, Apt. No., City and State					BUSINESS
	Last Name, First, Middle Initial					HOME
	Number, Street, Apt. No., City and State					BUSINESS

19. VEHICLE

a. STATUS

b. YEAR	c. MAKE	d. MODEL	e. COLOR *(Top/Bottom)*	f. IDENTIFYING CHARACTERISTICS

☐ STOLEN   ☐ SUSPECT
☐ GOV'T.   ☐ PERSONAL
☐ VANDALIZED   ☐ RECOVERED

g. REGIS-TRATION ▶

YEAR	STATE	TAG NO.	h. VIN	i. VALUE

20. ITEMS TAKEN

a. NAME OF ITEM	b. QUANTITY	c. OWNERSHIP ☐ GOV'T ☐ PERSONAL	d. BRAND NAME
e. SERIAL NO.		f. COLOR	g. MODEL
h. VALUE	i. UNUSUAL OR UNIQUE FEATURES		

j. PROPERTY WAS   ☐ SECURED   ☐ UNSECURED
k. STATUS OF PROPERTY   ☐ RECOVERED   ☐ MISSING   ☐ PARTIAL RECOVERY
VALUE RECOVERED

l. NAME OF ITEM	m. QUANTITY	n. OWNERSHIP ☐ GOV'T ☐ PERSONAL	o. BRAND NAME
p. SERIAL NO.		q. COLOR	r. MODEL
s. VALUE	t. UNUSUAL OR UNIQUE FEATURES		

u. PROPERTY WAS   ☐ SECURED   ☐ UNSECURED
v. STATUS OF PROPERTY   ☐ RECOVERED   ☐ MISSING   ☐ PARTIAL RECOVERY
VALUE RECOVERED

21. NARRATIVE *(If additional space is needed, use blank sheet and attach.)*

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION

GSA FORM **3155** (REV. 3/2000)

Source: https://www.charleston-sc.gov/index.aspx? NID=631.

Figure 3.4 Sample 2 Incident Report Face Page

ADMINISTRATIVE

| AGENCY NAME | | | *INCIDENT NUMBER |
| CALL NUMBER | *GEOCODE | | *CLEARANCES |

TOD
☐ INCIDENT (NON-CRIMINAL)
☐ OFFENSE
TOA
☐ SUPPLEMENT
TOC

OHIO UNIFORM INCIDENT REPORT

*CLEARANCES:
A ☐ Death of Suspect — G ☐ Arrest – Juvenile
B ☐ Prosecution Declined — H ☐ Warrant Issued
C ☐ In Custody of Other Jurisd. — I ☐ Invest. Pending
D ☐ Victim Refused to Coop. — J ☐ Closed
E ☐ Juvenile/No Custody — K ☐ Unfounded
F ☐ Arrest - Adult — U ☐ Unknown

*CLEARANCE DATE: _____ CLEARED BY: _____

*REPORT DATE/TIME				*INCIDENT OCCURRED FROM				*INCIDENT OCCURRED TO			
MONTH	DAY	YEAR	TIME	MONTH	DAY	YEAR	TIME	MONTH	DAY	YEAR	TIME

INCIDENT LOCATION (Street, Apt., City, State, Zip)

OFFENSE

*OFFENSE	*OFFENSE CODE	*A/C	F/M & DEGREE	*HATE/BIAS	*LARCENY	* TYPE CRIMINAL ACTIVITY
1.	1.					1.__ 2.__ 3.__
2.	2.					1.__ 2.__ 3.__
3.	3.					1.__ 2.__ 3.__
4.	4.					1.__ 2.__ 3.__
5.	5.					1.__ 2.__ 3.__

(Enter up to three for each offense)
B- BUYING/RECEIVING
C- CULTIVATING/MFG./PUB.
D- DISTRIBUTING/SELLING
E- EXPLOITING CHILDREN
O- OPER/PROPOTING/ASSIST.
P- POSSESSING/CONCEALING
T- TRANSP/TRANSMITTING
U- USING/CONSUMING
G- OTHER GANG ACTIVITY
J- JUVENILE GANG ACTIVITY
N- NO GANG ACTIVITY

*LOCATION OF OFFENSE (Enter up to two)

1. _____ 2. _____

RESIDENTIAL STRUCTURE
01 Single Family Home
02 Multiple Dwelling
03 Residential Facility
04 Other Residential
05 Garage/Shed

PUBLIC ACCESS BLDGS.
06 Transit Facility
07 Government Office
08 School
09 College
67 Library
10 Church
11 Hospital

12 Jail/Prison
13 Parking Garage
14 Other Public Access Buildings

COMMERCIAL LOCATIONS
15 Auto Shop
16 Financial Institution
17 Barber/Beauty Shop
18 Hotel/Motel
19 Dry Cleaners/Laundry
20 Professional Office
21 Doctor's Office
22 Other Business Office
23 Recreation/Entertainment Center
54 Amusement Park
24 Rental Storage Facility
25 Other Commercial Service Loc.
56 ATM Machine Separate from Bank

59 Daycare Facility

RETAIL
26 Bar
27 Buy/Sell/Trade Shop
28 Restaurant
29 Gas Station
30 Auto Sales Lot
31 Jewelry Store
32 Clothing Store
33 Drugstore
34 Liquor Store
35 Shopping Mall
36 Sporting Goods
37 Grocery/Supermarket
38 Variety/Convenience
39 Department Store

40 Other Retail Store
41 Factory/Mill/Plant
42 Other Building

OUTSIDE
43 Yard
44 Construction Site
45 Lake/Waterway
46 Field/Woods
47 Street
48 Parking Lot
49 Park/Playground
50 Cemetery
51 Public Transit Vehicle
52 Other Outside Location
57 Camp/Campground
64 Rest Area

OTHER
53 Abandoned/Condemned Structure
55 Arena/Stadium/Fairgrounds/Coliseum
58 Cargo Container
60 Dock/Wharf/Freight/Modal Terminal
61 Farm Facility
62 Gambling Facility/Casino/Race Track
63 Military Installation
65 Shelter-Mission/Homeless
66 Tribal Lands
77 Other

*SUSPECTED OF USING
A ☐ ALCOHOL
D ☐ DRUGS
C ☐ COMPUTER EQUIPMENT
N ☐ NOT APPLICABLE

*TYPE WEAPON/FORCE USED
1. ____ 2. ____ 3. ____

*METHOD OF ENTRY	*METHOD OF ENTRY – MOTOR VEHICLE THEFT		*METHOD OF ENTRY – BURGLARY/B&E		

*METHOD OF ENTRY
1 ☐ FORCE
2 ☐ NO FORCE
*NO. PREMISES ENTERED

01 ☐ Motor Running/Keys in Car
02 ☐ Unlocked
03 ☐ Duplicate Key Used
04 ☐ Window Broken
05 ☐ Towed

06 ☐ Hot Wire
07 ☐ Slim Jim/Coat Hanger
08 ☐ Tumblers Removed
09 ☐ Column Peeled
10 ☐ Ignition Peeled

ENTRY / EXIT
1 ☐ BASEMENT ☐
2 ☐ 1ST FLOOR ☐
3 ☐ 2ND FLOOR ☐
4 ☐ OTHER ☐

ENTRY / EXIT
1 ☐ DOOR ☐
2 ☐ WINDOW ☐
3 ☐ GARAGE ☐
4 ☐ SKYLIGHT ☐
5 ☐ OTHER ☐

ENTRY / EXIT
1 ☐ FRONT ☐
2 ☐ SIDE ☐
3 ☐ REAR ☐
4 ☐ ROOF ☐
5 ☐ OTHER ☐

METHODS OF OPERATION

*CARGO THEFT Y ☐ N ☐

VICTIM

*NO. | *TOTAL VICTIMS | *VICTIM TYPE
I ☐ INDIVIDUAL F ☐ FINANCIAL INSTITUTION P ☐ POLICE OFFICER (IN THE LINE OF DUTY) S ☐ SOCIETY O ☐ OTHER
B ☐ BUSINESS G ☐ GOVERNMENT R ☐ RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATION U ☐ UNKNOWN

NAME (Last, First, Middle)

ADDRESS (Street, Apt., City, State, Zip) | PHONE

EMPLOYER NAME AND ADDRESS (Street, Apt., City, State, Zip) | PHONE

| *AGE/ D.O.B. | *SEX | *RACE ☐ B ☐ W ☐ A ☐ I ☐ U | ETHNICITY | HGT | WGT | HAIR | EYES |

OCCUPATION | SSN | *RESIDENT STATUS 1 ☐ RESIDENT 2 ☐ TOURIST 3 ☐ MILITARY 4 ☐ STUDENT 5 ☐ OTHER U ☐ UNKNOWN

*VICTIM INJURED? ☐ Y ☐ N | IF INJURED, DESCRIBE INJURIES:

*AGG. ASSAULT/ HOMICIDE CIRC. | *LEOKA INFORMATION: TYPE OF ACT. | ASSIGN. TYPE | ORI – OTHER | *VICTIM/SUSPECT RELATIONSHIP 0.__ 1.__ 2.__ 3.__ 4.__ 5.__ | *VICTIM/OFFENSE LINK | INCIDENT NUMBER

My signature verifies that the information on this report is accurate and true | DATE_____

REPORTING OFFICER | BADGE NO. | DATE

APPROVING OFFICER | BADGE NO. | DATE

FOLLOW- UP? ☐ Y ☐ N | If yes, follow-up Assignment:

ADDITIONAL SUPPLEMENTS | ☐ VICTIM/WITNESS ☐ SUSPECT/ARRESTEE | ☐ PROPERTY ☐ NARRATIVE | ☐ STATEMENTS ☐ OTHER | FORM RECEIVED BY: ☐ INVESTIGATION | ☐ INTELLIGENCE ☐ RECORDS | SPECIAL COPIES

8/2011

Source: https://www.femplate.com/forms-for-police/forms-for-police-3/.

Figure 3.3 (p. 40) is an example of an incident report form that includes a narrative section. This type of form could be used for simple reports, such as misdemeanors or incidents that did not involve contact with a suspect or injuries to those involved. Notice how this form is organized to capture the required UCR and NIBRS reporting requirement for administrative (blocks 1–17), property (blocks 15 and 20), victim, offender, and arrestee information (block 11).

Figure 3.4 (p. 41) is an example of a face page that does not include a section for the narrative. Notice the sections intended to collect the required UCR and NIBRS reporting requirement. Additionally, note the increased level of detail afforded by the removal of the narrative section. When this form is used, the narrative is placed on a separate page specifically designed for that purpose.

Uses of Face Page Data

The information contained in an incident report face page is useful for investigators, media outlets and the public, and national data reporting systems, such as the FBI's UCR and NIBRS. Investigators use face page data as the foundation for a criminal investigation. Information from each of the reporting segments is critical to an investigation and is often found in an investigator's follow-up report. Media outlets often create a police log from face page information that includes the type of offense; the date, time, and location of the offense; and the people involved in the incident. Face page information is important to the public to demonstrate proof of a loss for an insurance claim and learn about incidents that have occurred in their neighborhood or child's school. Accurate face page data are also important to the creation of national crime databases.

Uniform Crime Reporting and National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)

National crime data are compiled from the information reported by police officers on the incident report face page. Each month, the nation's city, university/college, county, state, tribal, and federal law enforcement agencies voluntarily submit crime data to the Federal Bureau of Administration (FBI). The FBI administers the UCR system and the NIBRS. These databases serve as the national repository for crime data submitted annually by almost 18,000 law enforcement agencies. Data from these programs are used to publish the annual *Crime in the United States* report, which includes "the volume and rate of violent and property crime offenses for the nation" (FBI, n.d.b) and the annual NIBRS report.

The UCR program was created in 1929 as a system of national crime statistics (FBI, n.d.a). The UCR has been in place for decades and collects data on eight offenses known to the police: criminal homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, other theft, and arson (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). Reid (1997), however, notes the reporting methodology used for the UCR has limitations. First, the UCR underestimates crime since it captures only crimes reported to the police, and many crimes go unreported (Reid, 1997). Second, the UCR uses a hierarchical system that captures only the most serious crime committed during a criminal event. If "a victim is raped, robbed, and murdered, only the murder is counted in the UCR" (Reid, 1997, p. 40).

Table 3.1 Uniform Crime Report, *Crime in the United States*

| Year	Population	Violent crime	Violent crime rate	Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter	Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter rate	Rage (revised definition)	Rape (revised definition) rate	Rage (legacy definition)	Rape (legacy definition) rate	Robbery	Robbery rate
2012	313,873,685	1,217,057	387.8	14,856	4.7			85,141	27.1	355,051	113.1
2013	316,497,531	1,168,298	369.1	14,319	4.5	113,695	35.9	82,109	25.9	345,093	109.0
2014	318,907,401	1,153,022	361.6	14,164	4.4	118,027	37.0	84,864	26.6	322,905	101.3
2015	320,896,618	1,199,310	373.7	15,883	4.9	126,134	39.3	91,261	28.4	328,109	102.2
2016	323,405,935	1,250,162	386.6	17,413	5.4	132,414	40.9	96,970	30.0	332,797	102.9
2017	325,719,178	1,247,321	382.9	17,284	5.3	135,755	41.7	99,856	30.7	319,356	98.0

In response to the limitations of the UCR, the NIBRS was first published by the FBI in 2011. The NIBRS was implemented to improve the quality and quantity of data collected by the police (FBI, n.d.b). The crime categories were expanded to 22 categories and take into account any relationship between the victim and offender as well as the use of drugs and weapons used (Reid, 1997).

Computerized Crime Mapping

While the narrative section of an incident report is valuable to investigators, the face page is particularly valuable to crime analysts. From this data, analysts can study the characteristics of crimes in order to identify patterns. With the use of computerized crime mapping, these analyses can then be used to locate crime hot spots and help administrators assign officers to the geographic locations where they are most needed. Computerized crime mapping, also known as geographic information systems (GIS), is the process of associating crime and the geography of an area to identify where, how, and why crime occurs (National Institute of Justice, 2013).

The location of crime and the local geography, including buildings, alleyways, and other prominent features of the cityscape, became an important focus of crime prevention theorists (Weisburd & Lum, 2005, p. 426). Using crime mapping, crime analysts can focus their attention on small geographical areas known as hot spots (Weisburd & Lum, 2005, p. 426). An example of a crime map can be seen in Figure 3.5.

Figure 3.5 Example of a Crime Map
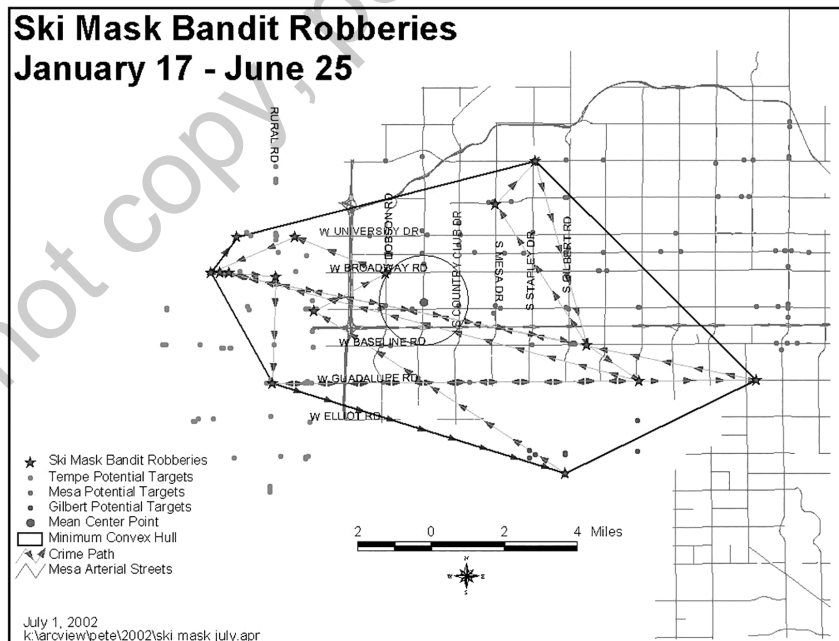
Source: Arizona Criminal Justice Commission, *Crime Mapping in Arizona Report*, 2002, p. 25.

In the News 3.1

Mapping Becomes a Powerful Tool for Police Departments

● ●

By Laura Nightengale of the Journal Star

Agencies track, evaluate, analyze, and share data collected by officers to operate more efficiently. The goal is to take the massive amounts of crime data and craft easy-to-understand snapshots of criminal and police activity. The technology provides officers an added tool to pinpoint hotbeds for crime and suspects. When investigating

a string of car burglaries, for instance, police know that suspects tend to stay close to home or develop a routine. By tracking that information, police can try to nab a suspect, and by sharing it with the public, they can warn potential victims to lock up and look out. Prior to crime mapping technology, police had to work harder to identify trends in crime and to get that information out to the public.

Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of the hot spot approach, and computerized crime mapping is viewed as an innovative and effective policing tool (Weisburd & Lum, 2005, p. 426). Reeves (2010) reported the majority of agencies serving a population of more than 25,000 used computerized crime mapping and that 100% of agencies serving populations of 250,000 or more used the technique (p. 22).

Tips for Writing the Incident Report

● ●

The need to write well in the criminal justice fields generally and in policing specifically has never been more important. Quible and Griffin (2007) observed that employers "consistently ranked oral and written education skills as among the most important, if not the most important, qualifications their employees should possess" (p. 32). Additionally, Kleckner and Marshall (2014) observed that "employers rated basic writing mechanics as second in importance among communication skills. . . . yet found that the employers' satisfaction level for this skill. . . . was the lowest among all communication skills" (p. 180). "Furthermore, the intangible costs of deficient writing include image degradation for both the employee and employer, reduced productivity when supervisors and officers must reread and correct poorly written reports, and incorrect decisions based on poorly written reports" (Quible & Griffin, 2007, p. 32). A well-written report will convict criminals, encourage community support, and reflect positively on the officer and the agency.

Basic Writing Skills

Like any skill, writing well requires practice and resources. First, one should obtain a useful, current writing style manual, like the one published by the American Psychological Association. Style manuals are easily found in local bookstores and online. Look for one that is fairly easy to use,

and purchase the most recent edition available. An excellent online writing resource is the Purdue Online Writing Lab, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/general_format.html. With some research, other online versions can also be found.

Computer spelling programs can be helpful when typing documents, but avoid becoming overly reliant and complacent since these programs will fail to indicate all errors. These programs will not detect improperly used homonyms, for example, such as there and their, here and hear, or too and two.

Writing for an Audience

Perhaps the most important concept in writing for the criminal justice professions is to always remember who will read the document—the audience. Of course, a supervisor and peers read the reports. Supervisors evaluate an officer's work, investigators use the reports as the foundation for an investigation, and the courts use reports to assess a defendant before and after trial. But a criminal justice document's audience does not stop there. As a public servant, a criminal justice professional's true audience is the citizens served.

Many criminal justice documents become public record, and as such, they are available for all to review. Attorneys, paralegals, and staff personnel on both sides of a case, as well as judges, may also read police reports. Imagine if a police officer writes a report being read by a Justice of the Supreme Court! Even today's cop crazy television shows are centered around police reports. It should go without question, then, that every report reflects the officer's best writing effort. Written reports are often the first indicator of professionalism to those who do not know a specific police officer, and sloppy reports give a bad impression. Every piece of writing should reflect the writer's best writing effort.

Writing Styles

The four academic writing styles include expository, narrative, descriptive, and persuasive. Briefly, the expository style explains a process, the narrative tells a story, the descriptive paints a picture for the audience, and the persuasive tries to convince the audience to agree with the writer's position on a topic. Although police reports are not academic writing assignments—nor should they be written or evaluated as such—officers use these writing styles in the narrative section of the incident report. Most often, the narrative of the police incident report requires a combination of narrative and descriptive writing styles. These styles are described in this section.

Narrative

The dominant writing style in a police report narrative is narration. Narratives tell a story by presenting events in an orderly structure and logical sequence (Kirszner & Mandell, 2010) that helps the reader understand the writer's purpose. Events are presented in chronological, or time, order beginning with the officer's initial involvement in an incident and ending when the officer concludes his or her role in the case so that readers will understand the sequence of events from beginning to end.

Descriptive

Descriptive writing is also appropriate for police reports, since these documents are required to be detailed and specific about names, times, dates, events, and geographic locations. Descriptive writing uses the five senses—sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell—to tell the audience the physical nature of a person, place, or thing. In order for the narrative to be convincing, it must include specific details to help create a picture for the reader (Kirszner & Mandell, 2010). Police officers must describe with great detail and accuracy an incident or crime scene, observations of all types, and the result of criminal and what is often violent, graphic, and explicit behavior.

Eliminate Spelling Errors

Proper spelling is a vital part of every police report. Just as improper grammar and punctuation are a sign of semi-literacy, so too is improper spelling. A misspelled word screams for the reader's attention and shapes a negative image of the writer, supervisor, and the institution. Several misspelled words can have such a negative effect upon the reader that many will simply refuse to continue reading, finding it too difficult to understand the narrative. While a spell check will identify and correct misspelled words, it will fail to correct homophones. In this sentence, *four* example, the word "four" is misspelled, yet a spell check program would fail to identify the error.

Source: https://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/c/chronological.asp

The following (p. 48) is a list of the some of the most frequently misspelled words used in criminal justice writing.

Eliminate Slang and Jargon

Like any other professional, police officers develop a way of talking to other officers. The slang, jargon, and even 10-codes of the police profession have a way of creeping into reports and speech. This can lead to misinterpretation, though, for those who have no knowledge about the profession. At times, speaking in codes is an advantage, but report writing requires a communication style that conveys information to the reader clearly and concisely.

Below are some of the words most frequently used as police jargon. One can usually replace these words with simpler words that people without police experience easily understand. If an officer must use a slang or street term, immediately after using the term in the report, include an explanation for the reader. For example, an officer may write about items of contraband discovered during the search of a prisoner's cell like this: "I found a shank (common jail terminology for a homemade knife) hidden in the inmate's mattress."
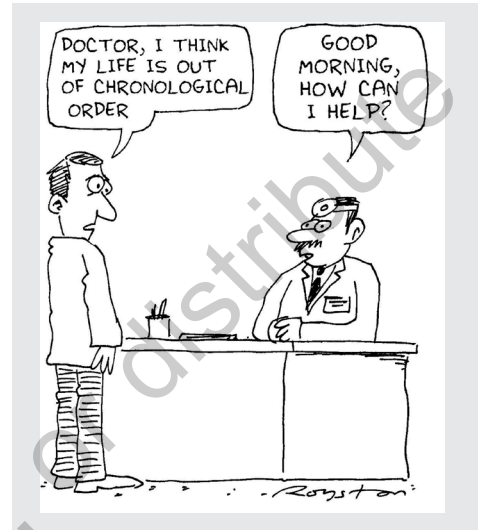
Accept	Attack	Disturbance	Paraphernalia
Accurate	Attorney	Efficient	Receive
Accuse	Battery	Examination	Sergeant
Acquaintance	Bruise	Fellatio	Sheriff
Advisable	Bureau	Felony	Subpoena
Aggravated	Burglary	Foreign	Tattoo
Apparent	Canvassed	Harass	Trafficking
Appeal	Cemetery	Height	Trespass
Apprehend	Commit	Homicide	Trying
Apprehension	Conceal	Interrogate	Unnecessary
Approximate	Confidential	Intoxication	Vicinity
Argument	Conveyance	Jewelry	Victim
Armed robbery	Counsel	Judge	Warrant
Arraignment	Criminal	Lieutenant	Weight
Assault	Cunnilingus	Marijuana	Wounded
Associate	Discipline	Misdemeanor	

Table 3.2   Examples of Common Slang and Jargon Used in Incident Reports

Slang or Jargon	Reader Friendly	Slang or Jargon	Reader Friendly
Stated Verbalized related	Said	Altercation physical disturbance mutual combat struggle	Fight
Transpired	Happened	Closed fist open fist	Fist
Exited	Got out/left	Struck battered contacted	Hit
Responded to the area of	Went to (specific location)	Was in possession or possessed	Had
Initiated/instigated commenced	Started	Verbal altercation verbal dispute verbal confrontation	Argument
Attempted made an effort	Tried	Located/discovered	Found
Monitored surveilled	Watched	Observed viewed perceived	Saw

Remember, professional does not mean convoluted or fancy. Officers should write reports in general English that most people can easily understand. Examples of jargon are provided in Table 3.2.

Eliminate Emotion

In face-to-face conversation, emotional content is communicated through tone of voice, facial expression, and body language (Melé, 2009). In written documents, the writer expresses emotion through tone. According to Charles Baldick in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1996), tone refers to the author's attitude toward the reader or subject matter. The tone of a narrative "affects the reader just as one's tone of voice affects the listener in everyday exchanges" (Ober, 1995). Writers of criminal justice narratives should strive for an overall tone that reflects an impartial, courteous, fair observer, that contains nondiscriminatory language and an appropriate level of difficulty for the audience (Ober, 1995).

Use a Professional Voice

Professional is a word with which many officers struggle. In the context of the written police report, a professional voice refers to the writer's tone and vocabulary. Officers should avoid writing like they talk, instead adopting a more professional voice appropriate for a business report. Professional writing is more structured than speech, uses longer sentences, and is more detailed than conversational speech, which relies on short, simple sentences and few details (as cited by Biber & Gray, 2010).

The writer's voice, though, should not attempt to impress readers with a large vocabulary or police jargon. An officer would do better to write a clear and easily readable report.

Answer the Interrogatives

Interrogatives introduce questions. They are the who, what, when, where, why, and how required in many criminal justice documents. The following is a partial list of basic interrogatives.

Who

1. Who is the victim, witness, suspect, defendant?
2. Who called the officer or reported the crime?
3. Who are the other officers who assisted your investigation?
4. Who are the medical personnel who treated any injuries?
5. Who discovered the event or crime?
6. Who was the first to arrive at the scene?
7. Who transported the injured to the hospital?
8. Who transported the defendant to medical?
9. Who discovered or recovered the evidence?
10. Who submitted the evidence for retention?
11. To whom was the evidence submitted?

12. Who photographed the crime scene?

13. Who signed the search/arrest warrant?

14. Who authorized the use of the technique/procedure?

15. Who were the backup officers?

16. Who comprised the entry team?

What

1. What is the incident?

2. What happened first?

3. What weapons or tools were used to facilitate the crime?

4. What involvement did the victim have in the incident? Was there any victim/perpetrator confrontation?

5. What happened next?

6. What drugs were used?

7. What name brand chemical presumptive test kit was used to test the drugs?

8. What injuries did the victim receive?

9. What treatment did the injured receive?

10. What observations did you make?

11. What action did you take?

12. What weapons did you use?

13. What questions did you ask the inmate?

14. What is the victim's relationship to the inmate?

15. What property was stolen?

16. What was the motive?

When

1. When did the incident occur?

2. When was the incident first discovered? Reported?

3. When was the incident first reported to institutional staff?

4. When did the officer arrive at the scene?

5. When was the evidence discovered?

6. When did the injured receive medical treatment?

7. When was the deceased pronounced dead?

8. When was the arrest made?

9. When was the property impounded/released?

10. When was the inmate interviewed?

11. When did the inmate confess?

12. When was the inmate advised of Miranda rights?

13. When was the stolen property recovered?

Where

1. Where did the incident take place?

2. Where was the inmate at the time of the crime or incident?

3. Where was the inmate found?

4. Where was the evidence found?

5. Where was the evidence submitted for retention/analysis?

6. Where were the witnesses in relation to the incident?

7. Where were the injured treated?

8. Where did the officer conduct any follow-up investigation?

9. Where was lighting located near the scene?

10. Where did the officer receive specialized training for the technique/procedure used?

11. From where did the officer respond?

12. Where was the inmate transported?

13. Where was the inmate interviewed?

Why

1. Why did the crime occur? (motive)

2. Why did the inmate wait to report the crime?

3. Why did the inmate react the way they did?

4. Why did the officer respond the way he/she did?

5. Why did the inmate confess?

6. Why is the informant motivated to give information?

7. Why were weapons authorized to be used by officers?

8. Why did the criminal attempt succeed/fail?

9. Why were specialized units requested?

10. Why was the officer involved in the incident?

11. Why is the officer writing this report?

12. Why did the inmate resist restraint?

13. Why was the inmate involved in the crime?

14. Why was the officer in the area of the incident?

15. Why did the officer stop the inmate?

16. Why was the officer in fear?

17. Why did the officer detain the inmate?

18. Why did the officer release the inmate?

How

1. How did the incident occur?

2. How did the inmate gain entry/exit?

3. How was the incident discovered?

4. How was the property removed from the scene?

5. How was the incident reported?

6. How long did the incident last?

7. How was the inmate dressed?

8. How were weapons used?

9. How did the inmate defend himself or flee?

10. How did the officer respond to the inmate's requests for help?

11. How did the confrontation begin/end?

12. How was the inmate subdued/restrained?

13. How was the item removed?

14. How did the injury/death occur?

15. How many officers/units assisted in the investigation?

16. How much contraband was seized?

17. How much did the drugs weigh?

Take Good Notes

Proper note-taking skills are vital to the accuracy of initial and follow-up reports. Note taking is the process of gathering and recording facts and information relevant to an incident. Officers gather a variety of information in a quick and efficient manner, so they may recall the facts of the case to write the incident report, assist follow-up investigations, and refresh their memory for court testimony.

Police officers often use a small, pocket-sized writing pad for gathering initial notes. Some officers use a digital voice recorder to record notes, crime scene observations, and witness and victim statements.

In practice, field notes should be written in a standard format to record valuable information. The standard format helps officers later when called upon to recall information from on-scene notes. In on-scene notes, officers may make entries with symbols that only they understand and use flexible shorthand to quickly record data. This is perfectly acceptable because only the officer is required to interpret this information from the notes later.

Writing the Narrative

The narrative section of a police report tells a story. Like any other form of writing, the narrative must have a logical structure to help readers follow the line of reasoning and reach the same or similar conclusion held by the writer. The narrative should have a distinct beginning, middle, and end that consist of an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

Writing a narrative requires more than just jotting down some information—it is a carefully crafted piece of persuasive writing. Of course, the narrative records data and facts relative to an incident. But it is important that the audience understands the facts of the case, the actions taken by officers, and how and why decisions were made. The narrative of the document must contain not only all of the vital case information, but it must also be logically constructed.

Criminal justice academic and professional narratives should follow a chronological order of events that have a distinct beginning (introduction), middle (body), and end (conclusion).

Narrative Structure

Introduction

The introduction in police incident reports is the first paragraph of the document. It is the reader's first exposure to the events about which the officer is writing. In a telephone conversation in which the parties have never met, the callers quickly reach conclusions about each other from voice, word choice, and conversational ability. Readers, too, will quickly form an opinion of the writer's competency as a writer, officer, and investigator from the first few sentences of the document. And this assumption goes well beyond the individual—an officer's reports also present the reader with an image of the criminal justice agency as a whole. Therefore, the officer is obligated personally and professionally to present to the audience the best possible impression. An officer creates this favorable impression not by using fancy words, slang, or jargon. The officer accomplishes a positive impression by presenting the reader with all of the necessary information in a clear and logically presented narrative. A writer should never assume the reader has the same knowledge about the case that he or she does. Therefore, a good introduction starts with a general statement about the case, gives any relevant background information, and focuses upon a thesis statement.

The Thesis Statement

A thesis statement is a clear and concise declaration of the main idea. In addition to helping the reader quickly and easily determine the writing purpose, it should also help the writer focus on the writing task. A clearly written thesis statement focuses the reader's attention upon the writer's topics. Examples:

1. At about 3:15 p.m. on 06/01/2018, I responded to cell 2015 when I heard an inmate screaming from inside the cell.

2. On 06/01/2018, while assigned to Pod B control, I saw a fight begin between several inmates in the Pod B common area.

Although some information, such as names, dates, times, and locations, may be contained in other areas of a document, officers must reintroduce that information in the narrative's introductory paragraph. The narrative should contain enough details so that it can stand alone without the support of information contained in other areas of the paperwork. This idea follows a key concept of this book—writing in a reader-friendly format that promotes communication and understanding. By reintroducing details, the writer helps the reader follow the narrative without having to leave the page and scan another section for pertinent information.

The Body

The separate paragraphs of the narrative's body should each focus upon a single idea or theme. For example, an officer might dedicate separate paragraphs to discuss an incident scene, a victim's statement, stolen property, or suspects.

A writer should use a topic sentence to focus the main idea of each paragraph. Like a thesis statement, the topic sentence helps both the reader and writer concentrate on what is to come. It is often the first sentence of the paragraph and presents the main idea of the paragraph ahead.

A good topic sentence is written clearly and concisely and identifies the subject or specific issue to be developed. Without some clearly stated direction, a reader is more likely to become confused about the writing. Just as a writer must present the total narrative in a clear and logical order, the writer must also do so within the paragraph. All of the parts of the document must be coherent and fit together so that it makes sense to the reader.

The structure of sentences within the paragraph can follow several models for a logical presentation. A writer can relate the events in chronological or time order as they happened. Or the writer might give special prominence to some event and leave the most important information for last. Relating the events as they occurred in a chronological, time-ordered fashion is often the simplest and easiest way to do this.

Conclusion

In the introductory paragraph, a writer would have told the reader what he or she intended to write with a thesis statement. Now, in the conclusion paragraph, the writer must remind the audience of what has been

written. A writer can effectively do this by restating the thesis. Rather than simply writing the thesis statement again, though, a writer should retell it in a slightly different fashion. For example, a writer could restate the thesis statement from Example 1 above as follows:

My investigation concludes the screaming I heard was from Inmate Jones, Allen, who was being kicked and punched by Inmate Smith, Michael.

Formatting the Incident Report

The Beginning

Paragraph 1

Background information

a. Date

b. Time

c. Officers involved

d. Assigned location

e. Office building

f. Room or office number

g. Facility name

h. Type of call

The Middle

Paragraph 2

What happened when you arrived?

1. What did you see?

   a. Use descriptive language to paint an overall picture of scene.

2. How many subjects? (Use a separate paragraph to describe each subject.)

   a. A brief description of the subjects

      i. Gender

      ii. Race

      iii. Any blood or other evidence of injuries?

3. In a single sentence, what did the first reporter or witness tell you?

Paragraph 3

If needed, add additional paragraphs for each subject following the format for Paragraph 2.

Paragraph 4

Describe your sensory perception of the scene.

1. What did you hear?
    a. Arguing, talking
        i. What was the subject saying?
2. What did you see?
    a. Fighting or wrestling
        i. Describe in detail (punching, kicking, biting, throwing objects)
        ii. Drinking alcohol
        iii. Injuries
        iv. Evidence
        v. Other disruptive or illegal behavior
3. What did you smell?
    a. Alcohol
    b. Marijuana
    c. Urine or feces
    d. Decomposition
    e. Other odors
4. What did you touch?
    a. Items that were hot or cold
    b. Weather conditions (rain, snow, wind, etc.)
    c. Room temperature

Paragraph 5

What did you do?

1. Approach, detain, separate, interview subjects
2. Interviews
    a. Tell the subject's version of the event.
    b. What did witnesses tell you?
3. What did you do?
4. Call for assistance or supervisor?
5. Collect evidence?
    a. Photographs
    b. Other items of value

6. Paperwork

    a. Obtain sworn, written statements

    b. Witness statements

    c. Other official forms

7. Arrest information (if applicable)

    a. Name of official charge

    b. State statute number

    c. Who transported the subject to medical?

    d. How was the subject transported to medical?

The End

Paragraph 6

What did you do after the incident?

1. Submit evidence?

2. Make any notifications?

3. Any other official action that you took?

Table 3.3 Incident Report Writing Checklist

Writing Process	Organization	Format	General Writing	Grammar
☐ Notetaking— gather the facts	☐ Use a distinct beginning, middle, and end	☐ 1st person	☐ Answer who, what, when where, why, how	☐ Use standard grammar
☐ Write the 1st draft	☐ Thesis statement	☐ Active voice	☐ Use names—not labels (victim, witness, suspect)	☐ No spelling errors
☐ Edit for grammar errors	☐ Each paragraph uses a topic sentence	☐ Past tense		☐ No punctuation errors
☐ Edit for writing errors	☐ Each paragraph focuses on a single idea	☐ Chronological order		☐ No abbreviations
☐ Edit for organization errors				☐ No sentence structure errors (fragments, run-ons, comma splices)
☐ Write the final draft				

Editing

There are three parts to the writing process—prewriting or planning, writing, and rewriting or editing. Every written document should be edited. Editing is often more than simply proofreading for basic errors. For many writers, editing involves major structural and thematic revisions.

This type of major writing surgery is very easy for officers who are fortunate enough to write criminal justice documents with a computer. Studies have found computer-aided writers make more changes to their work and revise at all stages of their writing (McAllister & Louth, 1988). Rather than waiting to revise until the project is completed, as do most hand writers, the computer-aided writer effectively revises while writing. Menu bar and function key options that aid editing and revision include spell check, grammar check, format, text insert and delete, and text scanning methods.

While many writers fear the blank page and find getting started difficult, the computer, with all its writer's aids, seems to invite writing since the text is manipulated on the screen before it even touches the page. And once the writer understands the function keys, moving through the text to revise becomes easier. Rather than writing and erasing or sometimes starting all over, as in a hand-written document, the insert, delete, and move text functions can make revision easier.

Those who write by hand can still effectively edit their work and submit well-written, organized, and error-free reports. Editing should be done at three levels to include word-level, sentence-level, and global revisions.

Word-Level Editing

A writer should never go to work without a bag of writing tools. Basic writing tools should include a dictionary (either a paperback version or an electronic model), a thesaurus, and this book or another grammar or writing handbook.

Even though a thesaurus is useful, a writer should be cautious when using one. A writer should not overly rely upon the thesaurus as a tool to eliminate repetition of key words or phrases in reports. While a thesaurus is a useful tool, it can, like anything else, be abused. An experienced reader will quickly spot dependence and view this as a weakness in word choice and writing skills.

Sentence-Level Editing

A writer should scan the document narrative quickly but thoroughly, paying particular attention to the sentence structure, such as run-ons, comma splices, and fragments. He or she should also consult a grammar book for questions concerning sentence structure, the use of commas, and other structural devices that may not be familiar. Effective writers often seek resources such as these to help correct and improve their writing.

Global Editing

Reread the narrative again; paying particular attention to structure and organization is imperative. The writer should ask if the incident report has a clear beginning, middle, and end. Is there a clear thesis statement in the

introduction and a restatement of the thesis in the conclusion? Is the body logically structured, with each paragraph focusing on a single main topic? Is each paragraph focused and introduced by using a clearly written topic sentence? If not, the writer should make any necessary changes.

A writer should never write anything without first planning the structure of the work. The type of incident being documented will often dictate the structure of the report. Sometimes a writer will be able to decide what format to follow while, other times, he or she may not. The only rule to follow here is that the organization is logical and easy for readers to follow.

When editing for content, a writer should read the report first from beginning to end while asking himself or herself the six interrogative questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how. The writer should read quickly but efficiently to determine if he or she has answered everything that someone unfamiliar with the event would want to know. Is there anything more that could be added that would make the document more complete and easier to understand? Any omissions should be corrected at this point.

Table 3.4   Content Checklist: Be sure to include this information in the incident report

Incident	Inmate	Staff member	Infraction
Date and time	Name	Charging member name	Infraction code
Location	Identity number	Charging member job code	Infraction type
	Enemy level	Witness names	Infraction severity
	Inmate statement		Infraction narrative
	Inmate plea		
	Inmate demeanor		

Source: Adapted from Harrison, Weisman, & Zornado, 2017, p. 140.

In the News 3.2

Connecticut State Police Release New Report on Sandy Hook Shooting Response

By George Colli

Connecticut State Police released a report on the response to the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School that left 26 children and educators dead. A section of the report specifically addressed issues regarding late reports and the submission of reports that had errors despite having been approved by a supervisor. The report emphasized the importance of report writing competencies and the need to take immediate corrective steps to prevent inaccurate, untimely, and poorly written reports. Additionally, at the time of the incident certain units did not fully utilize the agency's electronic reporting system, which made it difficult for the assigned investigators to access and review reports.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

All incident reports include a "face page" or cover page. The face page consists of blank spaces and check boxes where the reporting officer enters information, such as the incident date, time, and location; the names and biographical information of a victim, witness, or suspect; the type of crime committed; and the corresponding state statute number. This information is commonly used for statistical analysis, crime mapping, and administrative analysis. The FBI also uses this data to compile the annual Crime in the United States and National Incident-Based Reporting System reports.

Writing well requires a process of planning, writing, and editing. Whether putting pen to paper or writing electronically, producing the best written work cannot be accomplished by simply writing alone. The written report is where an officer becomes a storyteller and engages the audience. The report should be written chronologically in narrative format to tell a story using descriptive words. Officers should follow general writing guidelines, eliminate slang and jargon and emotion, and answer all appropriate interrogatives. All writing must be written in standard English and error free. Finally, a well-written document requires editing. Writers should edit every written document at the word and sentence level as well as globally. Following these guidelines will help writers produce quality writing that reflects positively on themselves and the agency.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. List three uses for the data collected on the incident report face page.

2. How are data reported on the face page useful to crime analysts?

3. List some of the differences between the UCR report and the NIBRS.

4. Why is accurate data entry important to completing the face page of a police report?