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## Report Writing

### Part II: English 101

In the previous column we discussed some of the critical elements of producing a comprehensive report concerning the investigation. Remember, that one of the primary defense strategies is to attack the investigator's report as biased, incomplete, or inept. The report should include the information discovered in a chronological order that allows the reader to follow the investigation's progression. The investigator's report should be as clear and complete today as it was when it was first written.

While everyone recognizes the need to provide a full report of the investigation, it reminds many of us of the horrors of English 101. Shuddering at the thought of diagramming sentences, conjugating verbs, writing paragraphs, and learning about the past pluperfect tense, we stare at the empty page. Knowing we need to capture the investigation in a chronological order that leads the reader through the investigation, we stare at the page or worse just start writing.

#### Prepare an Outline

The first step in writing is to create an outline that gives order to the random fragments of an investigation. The outline must capture the investigation timing and flow, plus include relevant facts that support the elements of the crime. The outline sketches a framework for the paragraphs that contain the details in an orderly fashion, making writing easier.

- Entrance, approach, and selection of merchandise
- Departure, apprehension, and custody
- Biographical information and subject interview
- Disposition

For example, a shoplifting report should begin with the subject's entrance into the department and his approach to the merchandise. Next in the sequence is the individual's selection and concealment of the item.

Following that, one would expect the report to address the shoplifter's attempt to leave the store and his detention at the door. Included here would be any conversation between the parties, the recovery of the merchandise, and any unusual activity while moving the shoplifter to the loss prevention office would be detailed.

The next section should contain the shoplifter's biographical information and relevant statements made under questioning.

This is an interview that may have intelligence value for the organization and provide subject statements or admissions that may help to prove the shoplifter's guilt at trial. The shoplifter's statements should be detailed and contain exact quotes that support his intent to steal merchandise.

Last in the outline is the disposition of the shoplifter. List what paperwork was completed by the writer, such as trespass warning, and whether or not the police were contacted. Finally, if the individual was turned over to police, who took custody and transported him to the station.

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#### Evidence

Rereading the key bullet points in the outline of the report, we should now ask ourselves, "What is missing?"

One important aspect of any case is to identify and link evidence to the crime. The report should create a chain of custody for the evidence that supports the criminal charge of shoplifting. The writer should include a paragraph relating to the identification, ownership, disposition, and chain of custody of the evidence. Depending on the jurisdiction, the item

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may be held by police, retained in the LP evidence locker, or simply photographed and returned to stock. But regardless, its disposition should be included in the report.

Similarly, if there was a video recording of the shoplifting incident, it should be noted in the report and retained as evidence.

### Timing

Another fact that will be important to the disposition of the case is the timing of events. Beginning with the entrance to the department and selection of the merchandise, the important events of the incident should be linked to time.

At trial it may be important to know the length of time from the actual concealment of the item to the final moment the individual was taken in to custody by police. There are a number of jurisdictions that concern themselves with the length of the detention, but this may also prove to be an issue in a civil suit.

### Readability

The writer should strive to make the report easily understood by lay readers. Many reports seem stiff and unnaturally written because of the writer's choice of words. Just try reading a research paper in a professional journal if you doubt this. Sometimes just the title lets you know that the paper will be unfathomable.

Simply written is usually the best. *"The victim was supine in the parking lot"* might be better said as, *"The victim was laying in the parking lot."* Simple words are understood, while less frequently used terms require the reader to search for the meaning from the context of the sentence or as a last resort, the dictionary.

Report writers often use terms that the reader might be unfamiliar with. Most professions have "jargon" or "terms of art" that are familiar to the practitioner. If they are important to the report, these terms must be defined so the reader understands the word's importance and implication.

Another factor affecting the report's readability is the use of acronyms. DLPM, RLPM, APM, and DI are common shortcuts in most retail companies, but are foreign to the non-retail reader. Even in a conversation, it is difficult to try and decipher the organization's unfamiliar acronyms and keep up with an ongoing conversation. Imagine the frustration of having to search for the meaning of these letters every time they arise in later paragraphs.

### Quotes

Exact statements are contained within quotation marks. "Four score and seven years ago..." is the beginning of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address and is contained within quotation marks to signify these were the exact words he spoke. Many times conversations will be summarized by the writer, but there will be exact quotes that are important to the understanding or proving a crime.

For example, a shoplifter, Marvin Littlethief, might have discussed his drug addiction with the agent who detained him

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resulting in the following being included in the report of the incident:

*While waiting for the police to arrive, Marvin Littlethief spoke of his addiction to crack cocaine and the effect it has had on his life. He said he has been a drug user for over six years and has not been able to hold a job for the last three years as a result of his addiction. He said that he supports himself primarily by shoplifting. Marvin said, "I came in here today and stole those razors hoping to sell them for enough money so I could buy some dope."*

*Marvin Littlethief went on to say that he shoplifts about six times a week depending how much he can get for the merchandise. He said, "I figured I could get a hundred for the ones (razors) I tried to take from here."*

The quotes used in the report also require a context to make them fully understandable. The writer sets the stage for using a quote by writing in summary about the conversation and then including the quote. Quotes are generally powerful evidence and should be included where relevant to the incident.

Some quotes, if they are to stand alone, may require the writer assist the reader with the quotes meaning. As an example, the last sentence of the previous paragraph the writer has used parenthesis within the quote to assist the reader in understanding what the term "ones" meant.

### Edit, Edit, Edit

Finally written and done, the report must be reviewed and rewritten. Can it be said more clearly or simply?

One way to review the report is to read it aloud, listening for awkward sounding phrases or words. If the sentence does not sound right to the ear, consider rewriting it to make it flow more smoothly.

The computer gods gave us the marvelous spell check and grammar functions to eliminate spelling and grammar faux pas, so use them. While the grammar function does not always offer the best sentence structure, it highlights awkwardly structured sentences that should be reviewed closely.

Once you have completed the report and edited it, take a coffee break and put the report aside for a while. When you return refreshed, reread it and look for more errors. Amazingly, the report just completed will reveal more changes to enhance the readability and clarity. A last spell check and you are finished.

Hemingway would be proud. ■