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Report Writing

Part III: Structure and Grammar

For those of you making a hiring decision between two comparatively qualified candidates, have you ever asked to see a writing sample? Ask to see the best case report they have written...less its identifying information of course...and prepare to have your eyes opened. You may discover the five-page paragraph or, even more frightening, the ten-line run-on sentence extended to that length by the clever use of commas and semicolons.

In the previous two installments of this column, we discussed the general format of a report using the incident's chronological order and, in Part II, its content and readability. Yes, there is a third part to report writing—structure and grammar.

There are two essential building blocks to the completion of any report. The first is a chronological recounting of the investigation. The second is an outline detailing the components of the report.

Effectively the outline breaks the report into paragraphs or topics containing a single idea. Careful attention must be paid to the structure and grammar of each paragraph to ensure that one is accurately communicating the facts of the event.

Paragraph

The paragraph provides two primary functions for the reader. The paragraph takes large blocks of text and divides them into smaller units making the overall reading seem less daunting. Without these breaks, the text would run on in a seemingly endless way that puts the reader off. By breaking the text up into smaller portions it encourages the readability of the document.

The second function of the paragraph is to divide the text into ideas or topics that are self-contained in the paragraph. It is usually the first sentence that introduces the topic contained within the paragraph. Many students highlight this first sentence as a way of quickly finding information in a book or article. The underlying sentences expand on the topic or idea giving the pertinent details.

Once a paragraph has been written it should be examined to determine if it should be divided into one or more paragraphs to improve comprehension and readability. The writer should consider each paragraph as a building block improving and expanding the development of the report.

In general, paragraphs should be composed of at least two sentences, unless it relates to dialogue where each change of speaker begins a new paragraph. This helps the reader follow the conversation and clearly denotes a change in speakers. Just as large paragraphs tend to put off the reader, a series of short one or two sentence paragraphs become a distraction and difficult to read.

Sentence

The sentence is the fundamental building block of the paragraph. Each sentence relates to the topic or theme of the paragraph. The writer must make sure that each sentence supports the central theme of the paragraph, adding details that were not presented previously. The best sentences are those that are not overly long or complex.

Writing an effective report is a fundamental skill for a loss prevention professional. Anyone can improve their report writing by remembering the basic building blocks.

A common problem in sentence structure is the failure to position words in the sentence so that they show their true relationship. If the writer fails to carefully organize his words, it will present a confused meaning to the reader. Consider the following example:

You can call your mother at home and tell her about the book you got for just 25 cents.

In the preceding sentence the reader is likely confused about whether the book or the phone call cost 25 cents. This sentence might be better written in the following fashion:

You can call your mother at home for 25 cents and tell her about the book you got.

In this sentence the reader clearly understands that it is the phone call that costs 25 cents and that the caller is going to talk about the book that was purchased, not its price.

Singular and Plural Nouns

Another common problem in sentences is the writer's failure to match a singular pronoun to a singular noun. For example, it would not be unusual for someone to write the following two sentences:

*The resulting negativity is a clue that the **suspect** may be experiencing feelings associated with doing something **they** know is wrong.*

*Perhaps the **liar's** stories do not seem very compelling because **they** are reflecting on the fact that **they** do not fully accept **their** lies in the same way people embrace the truth.*

In the first sentence there is a conflict between the single person "suspect" and the plural "they." It should be written:

*The resulting negativity is a clue that the **suspect** may be experiencing feelings associated with doing something **he** knows is wrong.*

The second example has a similar conflict and could be rewritten:

*Perhaps the **liar's** stories do not seem very compelling because **he** is reflecting on the fact that **he** does not fully accept his lies in the same way people embrace the truth.*

But could the sentence be improved again by restructuring the sentence to simplify it?

Perhaps the liar's stories do not seem very compelling because he does not fully accept them in the same way people embrace the truth.

Possessive

The preceding sentence leads to another common punctuation problem—the use of the possessive. The possessive simply means that something belongs to or is related to something else.

David's book...
Doug's car...
The company's books...

The possessive is formed by adding 's to the noun, as in David's, Doug's and company's. In the sample sentence "stories" belonged to the "liar" so the possessive *liar's* was used since it referred to a single person. However, if "liars" was meant to be multiple people the sentence would be re-written as follows.

*Perhaps the **liars' stories** do not seem very compelling because **they** do not fully accept **them** in the same way people embrace the truth.*

Also note that since "stories" is plural, "them" must be used instead of "it" to establish the plural relating to "stories."

Quotes

There will be occasions where a report must reflect the *exact* words spoken by the parties. This is denoted by the use of quotation marks at the beginning and end of the person's statement.

Mark denied involvement in the theft.

The preceding sentence is not an exact reflection of the person's words so it does not require quotation marks. The way it is written also leads the reader to wonder about the context of the denial and what was actually said.

After being accused of the theft Mark said, "I didn't steal any money from the company."

The quotation marks indicate that these are the exact words Mark spoke after being accused of the theft. It is important for the investigator to capture the exact words that were spoken and provide a context for the quotation.

Effective Report Writing

Writing an effective report is a fundamental skill for a loss prevention professional. Anyone can improve their report writing by remembering the following building blocks.

- The quality report begins with an outline that accurately reflects events in a chronological order.
- The outline is then expanded into paragraphs, carefully including the details of the investigation.
- Then edit, edit, edit to simplify the language and ensure the correct meaning of each sentence.
- Put the report down, grab a cup of coffee before re-reading it a last time and making those final changes.
- Turn it in and know that there was a job well done. ■

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