

Back 2 Basics: How to Write a Good Police Report

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Good police writing has been commonly described as “clear, concise, and well-organized.” However, what does that mean? As police supervisors with more than 50 years combined service, we found out that you cannot leave the interpretation of those words up in the air. As an example, we once received a report from an officer claiming it was clear, concise, and well-organized, and to some extent he was correct. The report consisted of three words, “Nailed, jailed, and bailed.”

This humorous report became legendary in our department. We learned that to encourage good police report writing, it required that we define what it means for reports and documents to be clear, concise and well-organized.

CLEAR: For a police report to be clear, it must properly identify the persons, places and/or things relevant to the crime.

Poor Example: *Victim states three acquaintances struck him at the shopping center. One hit him with a bat and then they pushed him down in the parking lot. He admitted it, but she said she was not involved.*

Correct Example: *Don Smith states that as he and his girlfriend, Sandi Cook, were at Costco in the Franklin Shopping Center, Butch Jones, an acquaintance, hit Don Smith with a bat causing a bruise on his right arm. Then Mandi Smith and Danny Wolfe, also acquaintances, pushed him down in the parking lot. Butch admitted he hit Don with the bat. However, Mandi stated she was not involved.*

CONCISE: This means using the most precise wording to describe the crime and how it occurred while still answering the 5 ‘W’s and ‘H’ that are available (Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How).

Poor Example: *Victim was robbed with a knife after leaving the 7-Eleven at Broad and Main. The suspect fled down Broad toward the pawnshop.*

Correct Example: *John Adams stated that on 1/1/18 at approximately 12:30pm he was leaving the 7-Eleven located at 2748 Main Street. A white male teenager approached him holding a butcher knife in his left hand and demanded “all the money.” Adams gave the suspect his wallet containing \$20 (two \$10s) and the suspect ran east on Broad Avenue. Suspect was about 16-18 years of age, 5’8”, medium build, black shoulder-length hair, and wearing black pants, a blue denim jacket, and tan work boots.*

WELL-ORGANIZED: A well-organized report arranges the description of the crime in chronological order based on the officer’s involvement so that it is understandable and does not have to be explained.

Poor Example: *I got the call at 3:10pm and immediately responded to the Shell station. The victim was gassing his car and got carjacked. Witness got the license number and I BOLO’d it with negative results.*

Correct Example: *1/10/18, 3:18pm: Reporting officer arrived at the scene, located at 1782 Acadia Blvd. I interviewed the victim, Robert Brown, at 3:20pm. Brown stated that after fueling his red Ford F150 pickup, he started toward the cashier’s window when he remembered leaving his keys in the ignition. As he turned around, he saw his vehicle leaving the parking lot, turning left on Acadia Blvd. I interviewed a witness, Jerry Vale, at 3:26pm. Vale stated he saw the suspect jump in victim’s truck and take off quickly. Vale got the license number of victim’s truck, stating it was North Carolina tag MDL-1254. Vale stated the suspect was a white male, mid-20s, shaved head, wearing dirty jeans and a black hooded sweatshirt. I broadcast a “Be-On-The-Look-Out” at 3:28pm with negative results.*

When training police officers in report writing, one of the authors (Bruce), always said a good report should stand alone and is like a good joke - if you have to explain it, it sucks!

Welcome to this installment of **Back 2 Basics (B2B)**! This series provides law enforcement officers with quality, practical, and trustworthy information. Whether in your first or 25th year of law enforcement, training is always necessary. B2B provides quick refreshers, written by industry experts, on a variety of fundamental issues in law enforcement. The views expressed in these articles are the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect agency-specific law or policy. Agencies should consult their local rules of procedure and/or case law for specific guidance. All comments, suggestions, or questions regarding B2B can be directed to the Editor of In Public Safety at IPSauthor@apus.edu. Sign up for our bi-weekly email at www.inpublicsafety.com/newsletter-subscribe/ or check for new B2B articles at www.inpublicsafety.com/.