

The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas

=====

Police report narratives: Identifying the problems, searching  
for solutions and the need for accountability

=====

An Administrative Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for Graduation from the  
Leadership Command College

=====

by  
Alan T. Patton

Grand Prairie Police Department  
Grand Prairie, Texas  
November 2001

#764

## ABSTRACT

Is there a need for a comprehensive review of current police report narrative writing practices and is there a necessity for analysis of review procedures to insure report narratives are written accurately with attention to detail?

Literature researched concerning police report narrative writing revealed the **“proper”** manner for accurate, detail oriented narrative preparation. This painstaking research into police report writing – combined with the author’s vast knowledge of this topic – leads to the conclusion that there is a definite need for a detailed and broad review of current police report narrative writing practices. Additional research shows there is also a need for quality review of those police report narratives by police supervision.

The author proposes each department form a panel whose express purpose would be to conduct a thorough review of report narrative problem areas. This panel should be responsible for setting a guideline for proper police report narrative preparation. The author recommends the panel be composed of a cross-section of uniformed patrol officers, field training officer’s, a shift commander and several experienced criminal investigators. It is also recommended that the panel be staffed by several other uniformed patrol officer’s who are known to be opponents of any change in the report narrative preparation process.

The standard subsequently established by that panel would then need to be strictly enforced by those police supervisors in each reporting officers chain-of-command. This thorough, diligent review needs to be made in order to ensure accuracy and completeness of the information provided by the reporting officer.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction.....	1
Review of Literature.....	4
Methodology.....	8
Findings.....	9
Discussion/Conclusions.....	14
References.....	16

## Introduction

Is there a need for a comprehensive review of current police report narrative writing practices and is there a necessity for analysis of review procedures to insure report narratives are written accurately and with attention to detail?

Police report narrative writing is a skill and an art. There are no short cuts to good police report narrative preparation. Good report writing requires specific training, practice and thorough examination in order to ensure quality and accuracy. A Police officer writes a report narrative to record his activities, observations and findings. These narratives are a written recollection of the officer, providing the reader with details concerning the offense or arrest incident. Each report narrative serves as the "word picture" relating to the who, what, when, where, how and – when known – why the criminal offense occurred or an arrest was effected.

Once written the police report narrative serves as a vital, permanent record of the events recorded. A narrative serves as the basis for assessment of what has been accomplished, what investigative action could be taken and as the foundation for criminal prosecution.

Presently there is no consistency among police departments, or even among units within some police organizations as it relates to narrative writing. The problem evolves from a lack of continuity or acceptable, approved standards for all officers's to follow.

For many years police narrative writing has been below standard. Because of those carelessly prepared police narratives, many problems have arisen. Poorly written narratives reflect negatively on the reporting officer, the supervisor approving that report and possibly the City, County or State agency employing the reporting officer.

Among other problems, poor report narratives often fail to establish probable cause that a

crime occurred, or fail to contain probable cause supporting an officer's decision to make an arrest. Often leading to an internal affairs complaint or a lawsuit which could lead to severe financial penalties against the agency.

A poor police report poses many different problems for other professionals in, and out, of the law enforcement community. These report narratives possibly will be read by a criminal investigation team, a police supervisor, a District Attorney's intake attorney, a prosecuting attorney, a defense attorney, various City Government entities such as the City Attorney's office or City Manager, Judges, jurors and the media. Poor narrative preparation could create problems for District Attorney's during indictment and/or prosecution of the offender, possibly leading to acquittal or Grand Jury no-bill of an otherwise guilty offender.

The purpose of this project is to conduct thorough research into the varied problems associated with poorly written police report narratives. This project will include a search for meaningful, beneficial and manageable solutions designed to inform and educate the uniform patrol officer responsible for preparing these reports.

This project will address the issue of accountability for inadequately written police report narratives. Accountability for the reporting officer, the patrol supervisor, shift commander, division commander and, ultimately, the Chief of Police.

Technology now offers police agencies automated offense reports. That technology still cannot ensure the accuracy or attention to detail of the reporting officer's narrative.

Responsibility for narrative quality remains a human matter.

If recognized and practiced by police agencies around the Country the results of this research should lead to improved police report narrative writing. Which in turn will lead to

fewer law suits, better representation of the officer and their agency. The reader will also gain the benefit of understanding the need for accountability.

This research is intended to take an extensive and comprehensive review of problems associated with poorly written police report narratives and the need for improvements in the report review process by the Police supervisor. Research was obtained from classic and modern text, manuals, lesson plans and journal articles in addition to applying the author's own experiences gained in 21 years as a Police officer. Seventeen of those 21 years were spent reviewing report narratives, as an investigator and as an investigations supervisor. This was combined with discussions with Police supervisors from other agencies and will be the methodology of this research.

It is likely this review of report writing and report review procedures will reveal an abundance of problems with police report narrative writing along with a lax supervisory review process, raising the question of accountability. The results of this examination can be shared with other Police agencies around the Country. The benefit of this research could lead to more accurate and reliable police report narrative writing, which should lead to fewer law suits, fewer problems for prosecutors, higher indictment and conviction rates as well as a better representation of the office and the agency employing the officer.

## **Review of Literature**

A review of classic and modern literature pertaining to Police report narrative writing and report review appears to be limited to primarily classic materials. The most recent book concerning police report writing is dated 1998, so the author will rely on personal knowledge and personal conversations with other police agency supervisors for more modern day ideas concerning police report narrative writing.

A police officer writes a report narrative in order to record his or her activities, findings and observations as they pertain to each offense or arrest. Each officer's report narrative is a written recollection of the officer, which should detail the officer's actions, observations and discoveries (Dienstein, 1964).

A police report narrative serves as the initial source of information providing the reader with details concerning the offense or arrest incident (Patterson, 1968). Each report narrative serves as the "word picture" relating to the who, what, when, where, how and why the criminal offense occurred or an arrest was effected (Jakob, 1991).

Police report narrative writing is a skill and an art. There are no short cuts to good police report narrative preparation. Good report writing requires specific training, practice and thorough examination in order to ensure quality and accuracy. Officers should view themselves as "information managers," mentally preparation of their reports should begin the moment they are dispatched to the scene of a crime (Bintliff, 1991). The ability to write accurate, understandable and complete report narratives is a basic requirement for police officers who must document facts and circumstances or unusual occurrences through their written reports (Brown, 1998).

Once written the police report narrative serves as a vital, permanent record of the events

recorded (Kakonis, 1978). Additionally report narratives serve many purposes. A narrative serves as the basis for assessment of what has been accomplished, what investigative action could be taken and as the foundation for criminal prosecution.

Presently there is no set standard among police departments regarding the police report narrative. There appears there be considerable discrepancies among police departments regarding guidelines concerning preparation of the police report narrative. The problem partly evolves from a lack of continuity or acceptable, approved standards for all officers to follow.

For many years police report narrative writing has been below standard. Because of those carelessly prepared police report narratives, numerous problems have arisen. Poorly written narratives reflect negatively on the reporting officer, the supervisor approving that report and the agency employing the officer. Another problem is that poor report narratives often fail to establish probable cause that a criminal offense has occurred, or fails to contain probable cause supporting an officer's decision to make an arrest. The arrest report narrative is where the reporting officer will tell the story of the incident, ending in the arrest of a suspect (Kakonis, 1978). Poor narrative preparation also potentially could create prosecution problems for District Attorney's during indictment and/or prosecution of the offender, possibly leading to acquittal or Grand Jury no-bill of an otherwise guilty offender.

Research shows the importance of officer's including details pertaining to who, what, when, where, how and why in their report narratives (Jakob, 1991). Officer's often times fail to address the Penal Code elements of the criminal offense reported. The officer's inaccurately and/or poorly address the narrative failing to consider the chronological order in which those events occurred or are reported to them. Another problem is officers make excessive use of police jargon or terminology. Officers should avoid the use of jargon if it is a ponderous



or wordy way of saying something simple, rather than a short way of saying something complex (Welch, 2001).

Research also suggests officers should write their report narrative in first person as opposed to third person. Officers incorrectly or improperly make use certain words. They write overly wordy sentences and paragraphs and accurate spelling is essential in police report writing (Frazee, 1993). Having difficulty with spelling and misspelling words are two different things. No one knows or cares whether an officer has difficulty in spelling a word. But the public expects, and professionals demand, that officers spell correctly when it is important the officer be precise and correct (Pease, 1979).

Officer's tend to use poor grammar (Amirie, 1994) and have a tendency to unnecessarily over dramatize. Police officers sometimes also include their personal opinion in their report narratives. Officers must pay particular attention to the facts of the incident and be able to separate the facts from their own opinion or speculation (Newlan, 1981). This is because an officer's opinion is often incorrect and once written that opinion becomes ammunition for a defense attorney and/or creates difficulties for the criminal investigator.

People who work in the criminal justice system read police reports as part of their job. They read police reports to get information that helps them make decisions in the performance of their jobs (Miller, 1993). Report narratives potentially will be read by other officer's, a criminal investigation team, a police supervisor, prosecuting attorney's, defense attorney's, various City Government agencies, Judges, jurors and reporters (Hess, 1978).

Most police officer's initially approach report writing with fear and trepidation (Naval Support Activity Monterey Bay Department of Public Safety Division Training Branch, 2001). Their fears are confirmed when they get reports sent back for correction with a pack of cynical

comments from their shift supervisor. About the time they figure they have finally got report writing mastered, they switch shifts, and they start going through the process again of having to adjust to the preferences of their new shift supervisor.

Very few shift supervisors actually review these reports thoroughly, leading to approval of badly written report narratives, which leads to a need for improved accountability. Timely performance feedback is the control mechanism for effective supervisors (Carr, 1980). Supervisors should explain to their officers that the reports main purpose is to provide evidence for prosecution. Supervisors must make certain that the officers reports are brief, timely and accurate (Newlan, 1981).

### Methodology

Is there a need for a comprehensive review of current police report narrative writing practices and is there a necessity for analysis of review procedures to insure report narratives or written accurately and with attention to detail?

The literature researched concerning police report narrative writing revealed the **“proper”** manner for accurate, detail oriented narrative preparation. This painstaking research into police report writing – combined with the author’s vast knowledge of this topic – leads to the conclusion that there is a definite need for a detailed and broad review of current police report narrative writing practices. Additional research shows there is also a need for quality review of those police report narratives by police supervision.

Review of reference materials was limited to primarily classic literature regarding police report narrative writing. The most recent resource found was a book pertaining to police report writing that was written in 1998. The methodology used for this research will rely on the personal knowledge of the author along with personal conversations with supervisors from other police agencies.

During the course of this research it was discovered that it is recommended that police officers should write their report narratives in first person form as opposed to third person. Officers often mistakenly or improperly make use of certain words. They write overly wordy sentences and paragraphs and correct spelling is fundamental. Research also showed officer’s have a penchant for using poor grammar and have a tendency to sensationalize. Police officers, from time to time, also include their personal opinions in their report narratives.

## Findings

A police officer writes an offense or arrest report to record his or her activities and findings as they pertain to each offense or arrest. Each officer's report narrative is a written recollection of the officer, which should detail that officer's actions, observations and discoveries (Dienstein, 1964).

A Police report narrative serves as the initial source of information providing the reader with details concerning the offense or arrest incident (Patterson, 1968). Each report narrative serves as the "word picture" relating to the who, what, when, where, how and why the criminal offense occurred or an arrest was effected (Jakob, 1991).

Information included in a police report narrative depends upon the purpose of the report. Whatever the report purpose, each report narrative should inform the reader of certain activities. The narrative section of the report describes what happened. Officer's should remember that the reader of the report is relying upon them to give a clear description of events (Jakob, 1991).

The object of the report should be to secure information explaining the occurrence of the criminal offense committed or the arrested effected. Police officers should be aware that the purpose of their reports should be to inform potential readers of the **who, what, when, where, how** and, when known, **why** the offense they are reporting – or the arrest they have effected – occurred.

**"Who"** covers any person or persons discovered to be connected in anyway with the offense or arrest being reported. **"What"** is designed to be an answer to the question that details the occurrence. Officers should be precise and factual. Officers should stick with discernible facts and to the statements of the witness or witnesses. The description of "what" offense occurred should be as specific as possible, such as Aggravated Sexual Assault, Burglary of a

coin operated machine, theft over \$500.00, etc.

**“When”** attempts to fix the day, date and time the incident occurred, the suspect departed the location of the incident or when the police officer arrived on the scene. **“Where”** should contain the specific location of all persons and things which may be related to either the offense or arrest. **“Where”** is the precise location of the area where the offense or arrest occurred. **“Where”** an offense or arrest occurred should be written so that any person reading the report could find the exact place in the community where the offense occurred or an arrest was made.

**“How”** answers a multitude of detailed questions about the criminal offense or arrest. **“How”** is a crucial piece of the information included in the report narrative. Here is where motive of operation is first mentioned. **“Why”** is often times excluded based upon the meaning and ramification given to the word. Why, when applied to human action, refers to motivation. Motivation refers to the initiating action that resulted in a certain outcome.

When asked for the reason **“why”** a person did something, they will almost always respond with an answer of some variety. However, that answer might not match the **“real reason”** or motivation. Seeking to explain **“why”** might lead to speculation without the writer being aware that they are speculating. Trying to answer the **“why”** question could possibly lead to a false trail. But the only verification of the motive of a suspect/arrested person may be the words of that person, so I recommend answering the **“why”** question if the **“why”** answer was provided by the arrested person/suspect.

Once written the police report narrative serves as a vital, permanent record of the events recorded (Kakonis, 1978). A narrative serves as the basis for assessment of what has been accomplished what investigative action could be taken and as the foundation for criminal prosecution .

Police report narrative writing is a skill and an art. There are no short cuts to good police report narrative preparation. Good report writing requires specific training, practice and thorough examination in order to ensure quality and accuracy. Officers should view themselves as "information managers," and a mental preparation of their reports should begin the moment they are dispatched to the scene of a crime (Bintliff, 1991). The ability to write accurate, understandable and complete report narratives is a basic requirement for police officers who must document facts and circumstances or unusual occurrences through their written reports (Brown, 1998).

Presently there is no consistency among police departments. The problem evolves from a lack of continuity or acceptable, approved standards for all officer's to follow. For many years police report narrative writing has been below standard. Officers consistently have shown very little concern for the quality of their reports, spelling, grammar or neatness problems have been of little importance. Pride in the quality of the information provided by officers seems to have vanished as well.

Poorly written narratives reflect negatively on the reporting officer, the supervisor approving that report and the agency employing the officer. Among other problems, poor report narratives often fail to establish probable cause that a criminal offense has occurred, or fails to contain probable cause supporting an officer's decision to make an arrest. The arrest report narrative is where the reporting officer will tell the story of the incident, ending in the arrest of a suspect (Kakonis, 1978).

Research shows officer's often address the narrative out of chronological order. Prior to an officer writing an accurate description of events, they need to get a proper time sequence.

Events, observations and details must be arranged in the order in which they occurred, not in the order in which they were described to the officer (Jakob, 1991).

Often officers make excessive use of police jargon or terminology. Officers should avoid the use of jargon if it is a ponderous and wordy way of saying something simple, rather than a short way of saying something complex (Welch, 2001). An example being "the reporting officer observed the perpetrator exiting the motor vehicle" when "I saw the suspect get out of the car" is simpler and easy to understand. Research suggests officers should write their report narrative in first person as opposed to third person. Officers incorrectly or improperly make use of certain words. An example being "he was scene their" as opposed to "he was seen there." "He could here them" as opposed to "he could hear them."

Officers tend to write overly wordy sentences and paragraphs. When preparing to write their report narrative a problem faced by many police officer's, who are seeking to inform those who might read their narrative is "how much, or how little knowledge may I assume someone who might read this narrative possesses?" In police work, an officer would be wiser to tell too much if he or she is in doubt. A particular detail may seem unnecessary and excessive to the reporting officer, but not to their shift Sergeant, detective, intake attorney, Grand Jury, prosecutor, Judge, jury or defense attorney (Patterson 1968). Common sense and experience will be their best assistants in dealing with this matter. They quickly will learn whether to include information about the size of the portable building from which a lawn mower was stolen, or the screen size of a stolen television set. Each case must be decided on its own merits, but again, if in doubt, officers shouldn't leave details out.

Officers tend to use poor grammar. Words are the most important tools of report writing (Gammage 1978). Those words are visible evidence of thoughts and the means whereby

thoughts are transferred to others. Success in adequate police report narrative writing depends upon the confidence with which officer's approach report narrative writing, as well as the clarity with which they express their observations, activities and findings. To ensure success, officers must have as a goal to be effective in their choice of words. Constructing their sentences properly and using punctuation to the benefit of the person reading their report narrative. Understanding the appropriate use for nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs and conjunctions, as they apply to proper sentence structure, would benefit each officer.

My findings support my belief that poorly and incorrectly prepared police report narratives can create innumerable problems for the many number of professionals in the criminal justice field, and other associated fields, who rely on this information.



### Discussions/Conclusions

Is there a need for a comprehensive review of current police report narrative writing practices and is there a necessity for analysis of review procedures to insure report narratives or written accurately and with attention to detail?

The literature researched concerning police report narrative writing revealed the correct manner for preparing an accurate, detailed oriented narrative preparation. The results of this authors research into police report writing leads to conclusion that there is definitely a need for a broad review of current police report narrative writing practices. Additional research shows there is also a need for quality review of those police report narratives by police supervision.

The author proposes each department form a panel who express purpose would be to conduct a thorough review of report narrative problem areas. This panel will be responsible for setting a guideline for proper police report narrative preparation. The author recommends the panel be composed of a cross-section of uniformed patrol officers, field training officer's, a shift commander and several experienced criminal investigators. It is recommended, also, that the panel be staffed by several other uniformed patrol officer's who are known to be opponents of any change in the report narrative preparation process.

The standard subsequently established by that panel would then need to be strictly enforced by those police supervisors in each reporting officers chain-of-command. This thorough, diligent review needs to be made in order to ensure accuracy and completeness of the information provided by the reporting officer.

Concluding by suggesting law enforcement agencies would benefit by writing a specific report narrative preparation lesson plan to be used in intensive training to all patrol

officers and patrol supervisors. A lesson plan that addresses all of the identified problem areas. Additionally recommending that police administrators hold first line supervisors responsible for thorough review of all police report narratives.

The finding of the authors research, and subsequent conclusions did support the hypothesis concerning the need for formation of a panel whose express purpose would be to set guidelines for proper police report narrative preparation. The limited reference material available to the author restricted this study. Leaving the author to, in many ways, rely upon personal knowledge and experience.

The benefits of police officers writing well-written police report narratives are many. Officers will be able to more professionally express themselves by routinely preparing a detailed, accurately written report. Police agencies will suffer fewer lawsuits. Prosecutors will be able to more easily prosecute offenders without the fear of losing indictments or convictions due to poorly written reports. Everyone in a reporting officer's chain of command will be better represented by a well-written police report narrative.

## REFERENCES

Amirie, S. (1994). Law enforcement report writing. Westminister, CA: Academy Press of America.

Bintliff, R. (1991). How to write effective law enforcement reports. Englewood Cliffs, CA: Regents/Prentice Hall.

Brown, J. & Cox, C. (1998). Report writing for criminal justice professionals, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishing Company.

Carr, A., Schnelle, J., Kirchner, R., Larson, L. & Rishley, T. (1980). Effective police field supervision – a report writing evaluation program. *Journal of Police Science and Administration*, 8, 212-219.

Dienstein, W. (1964). How to write a narrative investigation report. Springfield, IL: Carl C. Thomas, publisher.

Fraze, B. & Davis, J. (1993). Painless police report writing: An English guide for criminal justice professionals. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Gammage, A. (1978). Basic police report writing, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Springfield, IL: Carl C. Thomas.

Hess, K., & Wroblewski, H. (1978). For the record: Report writing in law enforcement, a self-teaching guide. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Jakob, K. (1991). A guide to police writing. Ontario, Canada: Thompson Professional Publishing Canada.

Kakonis, T. & Hanzek, D. (1978). A practical guide to police report writing. New York NY: Gregg Division, McGraw-Hill.

Miller, S. (1993). How to write a police report. Albany, NY: Delmar Publishers

Naval Support Activity Monterey Bay Department of Public Safety Law Enforcement Division Training Branch (2001). Report writing lesson guide #207. (On-line). Available: <http://web.nps.navy.mil/~police/207.htm>

Newlan, I. (Producer), & Kelly, M. (Director). (1981). Report writing – the supervisor's responsibility (Film). (Available from AIMS, 9710 DeSota Avenue, Chatsworth, CA 91311-4409).

Patterson, F. & Smith P. (1968). A manual of police report writing. Springfield, IL: Carl C. Thomas.

Pease, R. (1979). The police officer's English language handbook. Huntsville, TX: Sam Houston State University, Criminal Justice Center.

Welch, B. (2001, June). Written communication. Paper presented during training at the Leadership Command College, Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Center for Executive Development, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX