

INCIDENT REPORTS

The short reports discussed thus far in this chapter have dealt with routine work. They have described events that were anticipated or supervised. But every business or agency runs into unexpected trouble that delays routine work, damages equipment or property, or may result in personal injury. These circumstances need to be documented in an **incident (or accident) report**. The audience for an incident report can be within your organization or outside it, or both. Employers use incident reports to make changes so that the problem does not occur again or so that a job can be done more effectively and safely. On some occasions, government inspectors, insurance agents, and attorneys must be informed about those events that have interfered with or threatened normal, safe operations.

When to Submit an Incident Report

An incident report is submitted when there is, for example,

- an accident—fire, automobile, physical injury
- a law enforcement offense
- an environmental danger
- a computer virus
- a machine breakdown
- a delivery delay
- a cost overrun
- a production slowdown

Figure 14.11 is an incident report about a train derailment submitted by the engineer on duty. This report is in memo format, but some companies or agencies require you to fill out a special form. While many organizations require a hard copy of an incident report to be sent or filed, others ask you to include it as an attachment to an email. Always check with your supervisor about your company's preferred method.

Parts of an Incident Report

Include the following information in your incident report. Note how Figure 14.11 includes precise and accurate information for each of these parts.

1. Identification details. Specify who and what was involved, and gather all relevant data—names, contact information, model/serial numbers, and so on. Record titles, department, and employment identification numbers. Indicate if you or your fellow employees were working alone. For customers or victims, record home addresses, home and cell phone numbers, email addresses, and places of employment. Insurance companies will also require policy numbers.

2. Type of incident. Briefly identify the incident—personal injury, fire, burglary, equipment failure. Identify any part(s) of the body precisely. “Eye injury” is not enough; “injury to the right eye, causing bleeding” is better. “Dislocated right shoulder” or “punctured left forearm” is descriptive and exact. A report on damaged equipment should list make and model numbers.

3. Time and location of the incident. Include precise date (not “Thursday”) and time (a.m. or p.m.).

FIGURE 14.11 An Incident Report in Memo Format



THE GREAT HARVESTER RAILROAD
Des Moines, IA 50306-4005
www.ghrr.com

TO: Angela O'Brien, District Manager
James Hwang, Safety Inspector

FROM: Nick Roane, Engineer *Nick Roane*

DATE: October 6, 2015

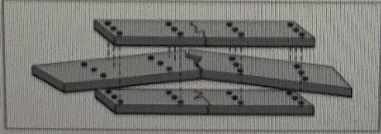
SUBJECT: Derailment of Train 26 on October 5, 2015

Type of Incident
Two grain cars went off the track while I was driving Engine 457 of Train 26 on October 5, 2015. There were no injuries to the crew.

Description of Incident
At 7:20 a.m., I was traveling north at a speed of 30 miles an hour on the single main line track four miles east of Ridgeville, Illinois. Weather conditions and visibility were excellent. Suddenly, the last two grain cars, 3022 and 3053, jumped the track. The train automatically went into emergency braking and came to a stop. But it did not stop before both grain cars turned at a 45° angle. After checking these cars, I found that half the contents of their loads had spilled. The train was not carrying any hazardous chemicals or other environmentally damaging shipments.

I notified Supervisor Bill Purvis at 7:40 a.m., and within 45 minutes he and a section crew arrived at the scene with rerailing equipment. The crew removed the two grain cars from the track, put in new ties, and made the main line track passable by 11:25 a.m. At 1:25 p.m. a vacuum car arrived with Engine 372 from Hazlehurst, Illinois, and its crew proceeded with the clean-up operation. By 3:25 p.m. all the spilled grain was loaded onto the cars brought by the Hazlehurst train. Bill Purvis notified Barnwell Granary that their shipment would be at least eight hours late.

Causes of Incident
Supervisor Purvis and I checked the stretch of train track where the cars derailed and found it to be heavily worn. We believe that a fisher joint slipped when the grain cars hit it, and the track broke. You can see the location of the cracked fisher joint in the graphic below.



Signs report to verify account of incident

Begins with most important details

Gives precise time, location

Describes what happened

Explains what was done

Determines likely cause

Supplies easy-to-follow exploded visual

(Continued)

FIGURE 14.11 (Continued)

Records
precise steps
taken

Angela O'Brien
James Hwang
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Actions Taken

We performed the following procedures after the accident:

1. Checked the section of track for 8 miles on either side of Ridgeville for any signs of defective fisher joints.
2. Repaired at once any defective joints we saw.
3. Instructed all engineers to slow down to 5 to 10 mph over this section of the track until the rail check is completed for 20 miles on either side of the accident site.

4. **Description of what happened.** This section is the longest part of the report. Let readers know exactly what took place and why, how it occurred, and what led up to the incident.

5. **What was done after the incident.** Describe the action you took to correct conditions, how things got back to normal, and what was done to treat the injured, make the environment safer, speed a delivery, or repair damaged equipment.

6. **What caused the incident.** Make sure your explanation is consistent with your description of what happened. Pinpoint the trouble. In Figure 14.11, for example, the defective fisher joint is listed under the heading "Causes of Incident."

7. **Actions taken.** Specify any actions taken to prevent the problem from recurring. They may involve repairing any broken parts, as in Figure 14.11, calling a special safety meeting, asking for further training, adapting existing equipment, doing emergency planning, or modifying schedules.

Protecting Yourself Legally

An incident report can be admitted as legal evidence, and it then becomes part of a permanent legal record that can be used by law enforcement and attorneys in court to establish negligence and liability on your and your company's part. It can also be used by an employer to determine employee responsibility. An incident report frequently concerns the two topics over which powerful legal battles are waged—health and property. You could lose a case in court if your report is not written competently, clearly, accurately, and completely.

You have to be very careful about collecting and recording details. Make sure your report is not sketchy, confusing, or incomplete. To avoid these errors, you may have to interview employees or bystanders; travel to the incident site; check manuals, code books, or other guides; consult safety experts; collect and describe evidence; or research records/archives.

To ensure that what you write is legally proper, follow these guidelines:

1. **Submit your report promptly, and sign or initial it.** Any delay might be seen as a cover-up. Send your report to the appropriate parties immediately after you have gathered the necessary information and had it reviewed by your supervisor. You may have to post photographs as well.
2. **Double-check your spelling (individuals' names, pieces of equipment, etc.), your math, and your punctuation.** An error here calls the accuracy and validity of your whole report into question.
3. **Be accurate, objective, and complete.** Give readers sufficient information to know exactly what happened and the order in which it occurred. Never omit or distort facts; the information may surface later, and you could be accused of a cover-up. Do not simply write "I do not know" for an answer. If you are not sure, state why. Also be careful that there are no discrepancies or inconsistencies in your report.
4. **Give facts, not opinions.** Provide a factual account of what actually happened, not a biased interpretation of events or one based on speculation or hearsay. Vague responses such as "I guess," "I wonder," "apparently," "perhaps," or "possibly" weaken your objectivity. Indicate who discovered, reported, or witnessed the incident. But stick to details you witnessed or that were seen by eyewitnesses. Identify witnesses or victims by giving complete names, contact information, places of employment, and so on. Keep in mind that stating what someone else saw is regarded as hearsay and therefore is not admissible in a court of law. State only what *you* saw or heard. When you describe what happened, avoid drawing uncalled-for conclusions. Consider the following statements of opinion versus fact:

Opinion: The patient seemed confused and caught himself in his IV tubing.

Fact: The patient caught himself in his IV tubing.

Opinion: The equipment was defective.

Fact: The bolt was cracked.

Be careful, too, about blaming someone. Statements such as "Baxter was incompetent" or "The company knew of the problem but did nothing about it" are libelous remarks.

5. **Do not exceed your professional responsibilities.** Answer only those questions you are qualified to answer. Do not presume to speak as a first responder, a detective, an inspector, a physician, a supervisor, or a judge. Do not represent yourself as an attorney or a claims adjuster in writing the report. And don't take sides.

SHORT REPORTS: SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

To prepare successful short reports, keep in mind the rules of short report writing discussed in this chapter. Always take into account your readers' needs and expectations at every stage of your writing, take accurate and complete notes, document carefully what you write about, write objectively and ethically, present complicated