

The officer should begin any summary or narrative with his or her initial involvement: "Responded to a call for assistance," and so forth. This sets the stage for the reader to follow the officer's actions from the beginning to the end of the report. It also establishes when the officer became involved in the incident.

The officer should then proceed to write the report in chronological order. Starting at the beginning, the officer can proceed to the present time or the end of the report. This principle gives an easy order to the material and also ensures that the officer does not forget some item of information that might be left out if the report jumped from the beginning to the end and back to the middle of the officer's involvement.

General Rules on Report Writing

1. Law enforcement reports are generally written about past events. Accordingly, under most circumstances they should be written in the past tense. Rather than write that the car is black, state that the car was black. (It may have been repainted since that time.)
2. Be specific in quantifying an individual's behavior in your reports. While the subject may be "aggressive" or "combative," those words have different meanings to different people. For example, reporting that the subject "took a boxer's stance, tightened his lips across his teeth, was breathing rapidly, and brought up clenched fists" is a better description of the subject's conduct than the comment that the subject was "combative."
3. The officer writing the report should write in the first person. Report writing should be similar to speaking. When speaking to a colleague, you would not say "this officer." The third-person "fly on the wall" report is more cumbersome to write and not as easy to grasp for officers being trained in how to write reports.
4. When you are writing reports that contain statements of others (witnesses, suspects, or other officers) use the third person to refer to the others. "Officer Smith stated that the weapon belonged to him."
5. Use complete sentences in your report. All sentences should have subjects and verbs and convey complete thoughts. Do not write in sentence fragments. Sentence fragments are groups of words that begin with capital letters and end with periods but are not complete sentences.
6. If the subject is singular, the verb in that sentence should also be singular. If the subject is plural, the verb must also be plural.
7. Collective nouns are always singular, therefore their verbs should also be singular.
8. Indefinite pronouns are always singular
9. Use adjectives to alter, give additional meaning to, or modify nouns and pronouns. Use adverbs to alter, give additional meaning to, or modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs.
10. Most words ending in *-ly* are adverbs. *Not*, *never*, and *very* are adverbs.
11. When deciding whether to use an adjective or an adverb, find the word being modified. If the word is a noun or pronoun, use an adjective. If the word is an adjective or adverb, use an adverb.

12. Do not use run-on sentences. Run-on sentences are sentences that contain two or more sentences in one long sentence.
13. Eliminate comma splices. Comma splices occur when two complete sentences are joined with commas without connecting words such as *and* or *but*.
14. Use correct punctuation in your reports. Poorly punctuated reports can be confusing and misleading.
15. Use apostrophes to show possession. Possessive pronouns (e.g., *his*, *hers*, *ours*, *yours*, *theirs*, and *its*) do not need apostrophes.
16. Many people do not understand the rules for using brackets. Accordingly, as a general rule do not use them in law enforcement reports.
17. Use quotation marks in reports only to enclose exactly what a person said.
18. Do not use abbreviations in reports that can be confusing to people who are unfamiliar with the subject matter. When in doubt, spell it out.
19. Poor spelling creates doubt about the report. One method of eliminating misspelling is through your choice of words.
20. If any force is used, the report should contain all the specifics of how and why the officer used force.
21. If handcuffs are used, the officer should report that fact. For example, one career law enforcement officer recommends the use of language similar to the following:

Mr. Jones submitted to my handcuffing him. He was handcuffed with his hands behind his back with his palms facing outward. I then checked the handcuffs to see that the handcuffs were on properly and double-locked the handcuffs and checked that they were double-locked. I asked Mr. Jones how the handcuffs felt and he did not reply to my question. I placed the tip of my right little finger between each of Mr. Jones's wrists and the handcuffs were on properly (Edward Nowicki, "Report Writing: Keep Excessive Force Litigation at Bay," *Police* (Nov., 1999): 48).

The officer should cover only the main points in the initial report. Other details should be placed in supplemental or follow-up reports. This allows the reader to gain a quick understanding of the incident without getting bogged down in details. In addition, the officer is able to concentrate on explaining exactly what happened without weaving numerous details into the report. Details are important and may be critical in solving the case or convicting the offender. However, they belong in supplemental reports rather than the initial crime report.

The officer should write the report in the past tense since it has already occurred. This also assists the officer in maintaining the chronological order of events.

Format

As indicated previously, most law enforcement agencies have standard forms that the officer will use in drafting reports. Filling in these forms is relatively simple. Unfortunately, there is not an accepted form for all reports in the United States. However, the different forms used by various agencies normally include the following sections.