

Effective Report Writing

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Writing an effective report can, like most activities, become tedious or exciting. Much of how we perceive the task of writing has to do with our own capabilities and mind set. In occupations that require written reports, the writer is in essence a recorder. Through the written word, he is able to describe places, events, actions and information in a brief, concise and descriptive manner. His writing style is designed to pull the reader in; thus, allowing the reader to use the same logic in reaching the conclusions reported.

The writing must be clear. Proper use of basic English skills is essential. If used properly, the written word is a very powerful tool. Unlike the *spoken* word, the *written* word lives on. Therefore, the words must be chosen carefully, lest they reappear to haunt us at a later date.

Especially in investigative reports, good reports begin with good preparation. While conducting an investigation, the investigator must be mindful that each activity performed must be reported accurately. Comprehensive note taking is essential throughout the investigative process. Most data collected is far too important to leave to memory. Notes or cues to the writer must be prepared to aid in the future task of writing. These notes must be made in an orderly fashion. Similar in many respects to note cards used in preparation for a research assignment, field notes are the basis for the finished report. The notes should contain all pertinent data, such as times, dates, names, addresses and other data, which may be available.

A routine must be established. Though each assignment is different, the methods used to collect data are essentially the same. Therefore, a set routine ensures that each and every investigation, regardless of the content, will be conducted in the same precise manner. The reports, in turn, will always be complete and meet the writer's desire to report accurately and factually the findings.

Effective reports are built. Like any building process, you start with a good foundation—a well-performed investigation. You then begin to build the framework—note taking. Then you complete the building process by finishing the project with the best materials available. A poor investigation, or poor note taking, can cause collapse. A sturdy foundation and frame yields high quality workmanship in the finished product that can weather most storms—or in our case—litigation.

Confidence is reflected in writing. After reviewing hundreds of reports, it is apparent when the writer is confident in his work and when he is not. Lack of confidence is apparent in the use of vague, unsure terms; overworked and wordy reports; and a failure to commit to a theory or hypothesis. Confidence comes with discipline, education and experience. The investigator must be willing to find the answer, rather than hint at unanswered solutions. The investigator must not put imaginary restraints on activity and make excuses for poor performance. *He must discipline himself to learn.*

Many of the talents needed to perform technical investigations must be self-taught. Seminars and schools are good for the exchange of information and new techniques, but very often they turn into social and political events, rather than educational forums. At other times, the instruction may be self-serving, intended to bolster the instructor's credibility, and may not, in reality, have a scientific basis. Confidence will allow the investigator to distinguish between fact and fiction.

To write effectively, learn to *read* effectively. Few of us are child prodigies, with an innate ability to write effectively without studying style. An effective writing style is the product of hard work. Oftentimes, reading the works of accomplished writers will enhance our writing style. Pick up a book or magazine. Read it and study the style. Can you apply the techniques to *your* writing style? Many famous writers have begun their careers initially imitating the styles of their favorite authors. Soon a unique and promising style of their own was developed by trial and error.

Effective reports are logical. The reader can, from the descriptive and logical placement of data within the report, reach the same logical conclusions. Investigative reports very often become the cornerstone of the litigation process. The attorney handling the case must be able to read the report and understand the points of contention. The facts must be reported logically and factually.

An exaggerated report may lead to litigation with no chance of success. An incomplete report may result in a failure to identify potentially successful litigation or the defense of unwarranted litigation. Therefore, reports must be *factual*, must be *logical*, and must be *complete*.

In many instances, the style and content of the report itself can prevent costly litigation. Most attorneys litigate when the chance of success exceeds fifty percent. Obviously, if a report is so complete and logical that the reviewing counsel can see no reason for dispute, litigation is cancelled. This basically means the evidence must be clear and convincing. Therefore, the *report* should meet the same criteria; it *should be clear and convincing*. The best way to

accomplish this is to simply report the truth. Do not embellish. Do not go on an ego trip. Simply report the facts.

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