

The Importance of Quality Report Writing in Law Enforcement

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to address issues with and inform other law enforcement officers of the importance of law enforcement report writing. The importance of report writing is immeasurable. Report writing is a much needed skill that can make or break a successful career in law enforcement. Most law enforcement officers will spend as much or more time in their career writing reports than at any other single task. It is important to ensure all officers receive guidance and training with report writing, beyond what they are taught in the Arkansas Law Enforcement Training Academy. This paper will address reports written from first person and third person perspectives as well as law enforcement language versus plain language.

The Importance of Quality Report Writing in Law Enforcement

To many people in the law enforcement community, the topic of report writing is of little interest and is not the most exciting subject to read about or bring up in a discussion. However, just as genius is described as being one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration, effective enforcement of the law is estimated to be one percent action and ninety-nine percent paperwork.

Paul D. Bagley (2013) in an internet article, states the last thing on the minds of the average new law enforcement agents is how they will document what they did in the field. Yet their report is, by far, the most important part of the job. Until events are recorded, written down for others to read, understand, and comprehend technically nothing has transpired. Events only become events when they are recorded for posterity, and recording for posterity makes everything a law enforcement officer does have historical implications. Even though the actions of a law enforcement agent may seem to be insignificant on a day-to-day basis, those actions, when properly recorded, can have national, even international, ramifications. For example, consider the actions of Cleveland detective Martin McFadden. While observing a suspect over a course of time, he noticed what he considered to be suspicious activity. By painstakingly documenting his observations, he was able to give an accurate account of why the activity was suspicious and justify the actions he took in response. Upon approaching John W. Terry, Detective McFadden conducted what has become known as a “pat-frisk” search. The result was the United States Supreme Court decision of 1968 in *Terry v. Ohio* that grants all police officers the right to frisk a suspect for weapons when they feel their personal safety is at risk. Everything

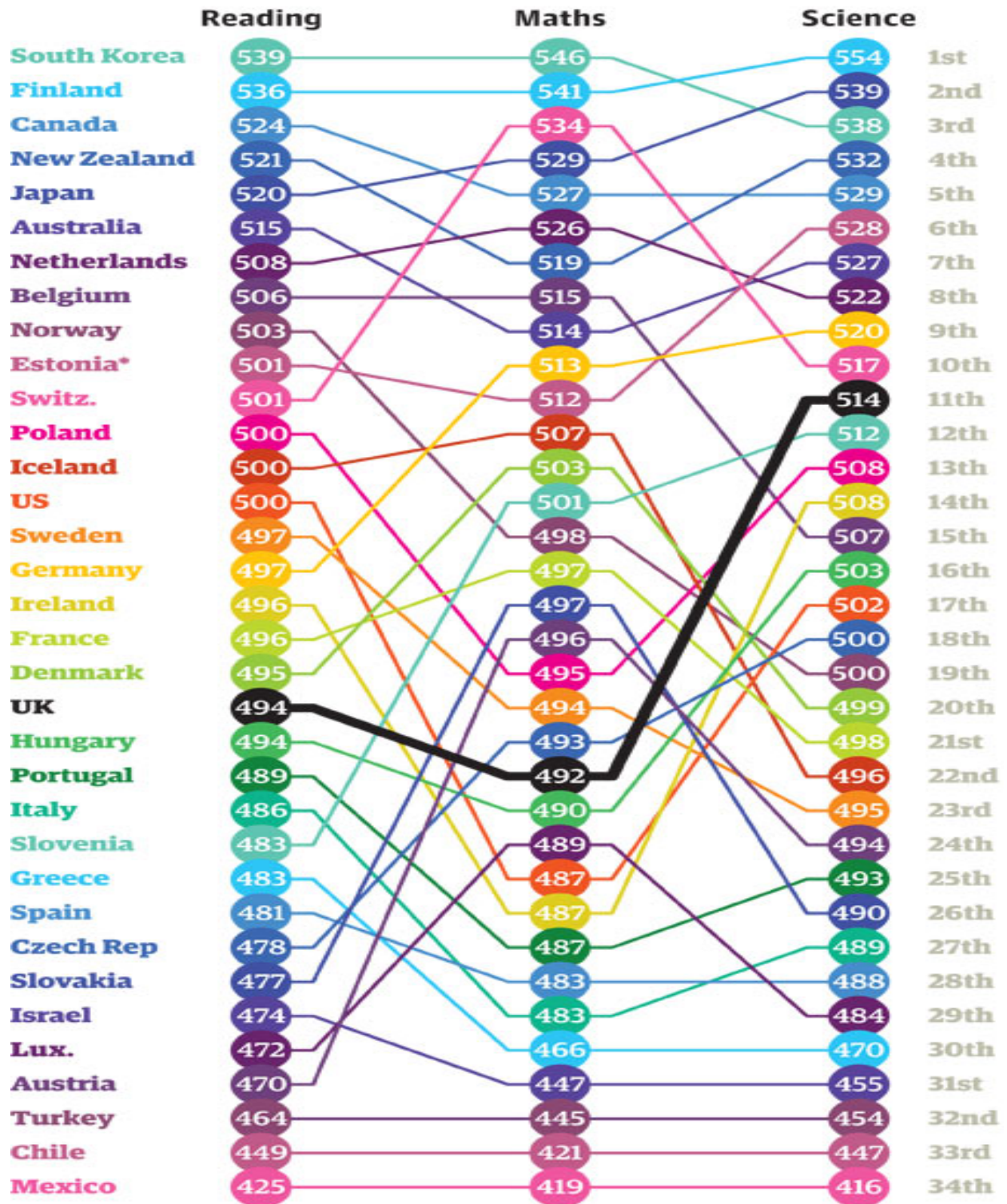
in law enforcement emanates from a report, from court trials to manpower and equipment allotments.

The Six Basic Questions

According to the Arkansas Law Enforcement Training Academy (1996). Law enforcement officers are taught early in their careers that an incident or investigative report should include the answers to as many of the following questions as possible, who, what, where, when, why, and how. However, just answering all six of these questions will not guarantee a quality report. Officers still need to write the report in a clear, concise, and easy to understand manner, and by taking care to record the chronology of the events of the incident. This will hold true with all types of incident reports from a homicide report to a shoplifting report.

Unfortunately, the quality of education received through the public school systems in United States of America has been and continues to decline, which may be a contributing factor in the poor quality of written reports by new officer hires. See the attached graph from a study conducted in 2009 by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The chart indicated that the United States of America was in fourteenth place in reading, twenty fifth place in math, and seventeenth place in science. The United States had fallen in the rankings since the previous study and was on a downward trend. This study also included the United Kingdom and other developed countries. There is currently no known law enforcement school that can reteach middle and high school English and Literature.

How the UK scored against other OECD countries



SOURCE: OECD PISA 2009 DATABASE. RANKING IS JUST WITHIN OECD COUNTRIES. *MEMBERSHIP PENDING

Whether it is due to the officer's lack of training, laziness, workload, or not being given enough time to write a good report, the end result will be a poorly written report.

When an officer habitually writes a poor quality report, it creates many negative effects on the investigation and the officer's credibility. For instance, a poorly written report gives defense attorneys an opening to attack the officer's abilities in court. This damages the officer's credibility in court with both the jury and the Judge. In fact the Judge may give less weight to that officer's testimony in future cases. Another area where it can have a negative effect on an officer is when that officer tries to advance in rank. Generally speaking, an officer who writes a poor quality report is usually deficient in other aspects of their job. A poorly written report will cause a detective or an investigator to expend more time and effort to solve or clear a case and thus cost taxpayers more money. When that officer later wants to transfer to the Criminal Investigative Division or Detective Division, he may have a hard time getting that transfer.

An officer's reputation is well known in the local law enforcement community. It will follow an officer throughout their career. An officer's skill with report writing will go a long way in building a good reputation. Attention to detail applies to all aspects of an officer's job, technical knowledge of the state and local laws and ordinances, uniform appearance, vehicle appearance, people skills, and most importantly, report writing.

Third Person Report Narratives

Some law enforcement departments teach and require their officers to write their reports in the third person perspective, in which officers will refer to themselves as "this officer"

throughout the narrative. It is as if a bystander narrated the events of the incident. The primary advantage of this method is the narrative sounds more professional. It, also, may allow greater flexibility for the officer compiling the report. A disadvantage is arguably that it makes the narrative harder for the lay person or juror to understand.

See below the example of a third person perspective narrative provided by the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office (2013).

The names have been changed to protect the guilty.

On March 22, 2013, this Deputy, David Cockrelli, was at the intersection of Princeton Pike Road and Bryant Street in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. A person that this Deputy knew to be Bob Jones drove past him in a gray Jeep Cherokee SUV. This Deputy knew that Jones had a warrant for arrest for absconding from the clean team. This Deputy had previously obtained the license plate number for the Jeep.

This Deputy turned around and followed the Jeep, which was now traveling at a high rate of speed. The weather was rainy and the roads were slick. This Deputy caught up with the Jeep and verified the Jeep's LPN matched with the one that he already had. This Deputy initiated his emergency blue lights and siren on Bryant Street. The driver of the Jeep continued north on Bryant Street to Dollarway Road where he disregarded the traffic light and shot out into oncoming traffic. The driver drove east on Dollarway Road. The driver then cut through the parking lot of the Exxon Gas Station, narrowly missing another vehicle that was backing out of a parking spot. The driver turned north on Hutchinson Street and into oncoming traffic. The driver was driving on the wrong side of the road for several blocks. The driver was traveling in a

northbound direction in the southbound lane. The driver turned east onto Jefferson Parkway. The driver continued to McFadden Road. The driver traveled at a high rate of speed reaching in excess of 70 miles per hour. The driver was darting around vehicles and was all over the roadway. The driver displayed a total disregard for his own safety as well as the safety of others. The driver of the vehicle stopped on McFadden Road where several other deputies with the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office were located. The driver and passenger were both taken custody. The driver was identified as being Bob Jones, and the passenger was identified as being Sally Jones.

Bob and Sally were both transported the Jefferson County Criminal Investigation Division. Sergeant Mickey Buffkinoski interviewed Bob Jones and Investigator Randy Braxton interviewed Sally.

Bob and Sally were both transported the W.C. Dub Brassell Detention Center in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

First Person Narratives

Some law enforcement departments teach and require their officers to write their reports in the first person perspective, in which officers will refer to themselves as "I" or "me" throughout the narrative. It is as if the officer sat down next to you and told you the story of what had happened. An advantage of this method is it makes it easier for the lay person or juror to understand. See below the example of a first person perspective narrative provided by the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office (2013).

The names have been changed to protect the guilty.

On Thursday, March 21, 2013, at approximately 1434 hours, I was dispatched by Metropolitan Emergency Communication Association (MECA) operator to a residential burglary that had just occurred at an old unoccupied brown house on Camden Cutoff Road, about a quarter mile north of Springlake Road. While I was enroute to the area, I heard MECA put out a description of the suspect vehicle. It was described as a maroon Ford F-150 pickup with black front fenders and a black or brown hood. It was occupied by three white males.

When I arrived in the area of the theft, I heard Deputy Anthony Craigston make a traffic stop in Pine Bluff on a pickup truck matching the description put out by MECA. The pickup truck had three white males in it and it was loaded with scrap metal.

I found the residence matching the description at 7230 Camden Cutoff Road. It was a light tan residence, obviously unoccupied and partially falling down. There were numerous scrap metal items in the yard and a fresh set of tire tracks in the mud in the gravel driveway.

I asked MECA for the caller's phone number and made contact with James Johnson. Johnson substantially stated as follows:

Johnson was driving on Camden Cutoff Road and met a pickup truck with a black front end and the rest of the pickup truck was maroon. The pickup truck bed was empty and three white males, who appeared to be in their mid-20s, were in the pickup truck. About fifteen minutes later, Johnson passed by his neighbor, Bobby Boykin's property, and saw the same pickup truck backed into the driveway and the three white males were loading scrap metal into the bed of the pickup truck. Johnson called Boykin and asked him if anyone was supposed to be at the old house place. Boykin said no and to call the police. I called Boykin and told him that

we had apprehended the suspects. I asked Boykin if they had permission to get the items. Boykin advised he did not give anyone permission to be there, and he wanted them arrested and prosecuted.

Law Enforcement Language Narratives

Some law enforcement agencies allow their officers to include law enforcement jargon or law enforcement language in their report narratives. As most law enforcement officers are aware, they tend to speak in their own language which is a combination of “ten codes” they use on the radio, or criminal statutes. This “lingo” is habit forming and officers will even use the law enforcement language off duty and at home. This language is the “law enforcement shorthand” in report writing. It is sometimes intentionally or unintentionally used in the narrative of incident reports. The advantage is it takes less time to write the report. The major disadvantage is it is harder for the lay person or juror to understand, and ten codes vary from agency to agency and state to state.

See below the example of law enforcement language used in a report narrative.

On Tuesday, September 24, 1987, at approximately 1840 hours, I was patrolling south on Blake Street when I noticed a possible code 2 driver in front of me. I followed a green Volkswagen Beetle, Arkansas LPN 123 ABC, as it continued to exhibit code 2 behaviors. I went signal 7 with him. The driver was identified as John Doe. I conducted a series of tests to verify Doe was code 2. I called for a 10-35. The 10-35 arrived and took possession of the Beetle. I went 10-19, 10-15 to JCDC with Doe. Doe refused to blow. Doe was booked for code 2 and refusal.

Plain Language

Law enforcement agencies across the nation have slowly started switching over to using plain language in talking on the police band radios and in their reports as well. The need for this change became evident when large emergencies which involved many different law enforcement agencies took place. Because of the variance in ten codes from agency to agency, there was confusion with the communications between agencies during those emergencies. It became obvious that a change to a more universal system was needed. The quickest and easiest to learn was plain language. Plain language is speaking on the radio or writing in a law enforcement report using normal English as spoken by the average citizens, no numeric codes used.

See below the example of a law enforcement plain language report narrative.

On Tuesday, September 24, 1987, at approximately 6:40 pm, I was driving south on Blake Street when I noticed a possible drunk driver in front of me. I followed a green Volkswagen Beetle, Arkansas license plate number 123 ABC, as it continued to weave and cross the center and fog lines. I turned on my blue lights and pulled the Beetle over. I walked up and introduced myself to the driver, John Doe, and explained why I stopped him. I could smell the strong odor of an alcoholic beverage coming from Doe and his eyes were bloodshot and watery. I asked Doe to step out of his car and allow me to give him some sobriety tests. I conducted a series of sobriety tests to assist in determining if Doe was legally drunk. Because of Doe's poor performance on the tests, I placed him in handcuffs and told him he was being arrested for Driving While Intoxicated (DWI). I placed Doe in my backseat and called for a wrecker to tow

his vehicle. The wrecker arrived and took possession of the Beetle. I transported Doe to the Jefferson County Detention Center (JCDC).

After we arrived at JCDC, I read Doe his Arkansas alcohol rights form and he both initialed and signed in the appropriate places signifying that he understood his rights. Doe then refused to provide a breathe sample. Doe was booked into JCDC and charged with DWI and refusing to submit to test.

Summary Statement

Whether your department requires first or third person perspective reports is of minor consequence. The most important things to remember when you strive to write a quality report are, tell the story from start to finish in a simple, easy to understand manner, make sure to include all of the information and take your time. It is not a footrace. A quality report takes a little time and effort. You cannot write a report on the fly and expect quality results. Remember this adage; if it's not in writing, it didn't happen.

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