

Writing in Criminal Justice

A cornerstone of criminal justice studies and professions is writing. While each profession uses forms specific to the job, these professions share many common writing responsibilities.

Professionalism in criminal justice can be traced to the early 19th century when visionaries like August Vollmer and Orlando Winfield Wilson led the movement toward a more educated and professional police force. Vollmer was named Berkeley, California's first police chief in 1909 and is known as the Father of Modern Police Administration due to such innovations as marked motorcycles and patrol cars equipped with radios (Wadman & Allison, 2003). He is also recognized as the principal author of the professional model of policing, which focused on rigorous law enforcement training, the application of science and technology in crime-fighting efforts, and a deep involvement in the community (Carte & Carte, 1975). He recruited college-educated men for the police force (Decker & Huckabee, 2002), created a police school in his department, encouraged scientists to teach his officers, and encouraged colleges to offer courses for training police officers (Langworthy & Travis, 1994). Furthermore, Vollmer is often credited for his reform efforts in the area of community policing by seeking favorable relationships in the community (Granados, 1997). Additionally, he urged the creation of a records bureau in Washington, D.C., which eventually became the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and was President of the International Association of Chiefs of Police—one of the four founding organizations of law enforcement accreditation—in the 1920s. Langworthy and Travis (1994) write, "As a police chief and professor of Police Administration at Berkeley, Vollmer recruited and trained the next generation of police professionals, including such luminaries as O. W. Wilson, who also significantly advanced the cause of police professionalism" (p. 85).

According to Langworthy and Travis (1994), "Wilson founded the first college-level school of criminology at Berkeley and was a national spokesman for police professionalism" (p. 85). With the support of Vollmer, he became the police chief in Fullerton, California, and Wichita, Kansas. Later, he accepted a position on the faculty at Berkeley, and he served as Dean of the School of Criminology between 1950 and 1960 (Langworthy & Travis, 1994). He left Berkeley to become the Chief of Police in Chicago until his retirement.

Throughout the 20th century, advances in criminal justice professionalism continued to gain support. John Augustus, the father of modern probation, kept detailed notes on his mentoring of drunkards placed in his care by the court system and following an Attica Prison riot in 1971, the National Institute of Corrections formed, in part, in support of education

and professionalism in the field (National Institute of Corrections, 2018). And the Crime Control Act of 1976 provided financial assistance for law enforcement officers to obtain a college degree (Department of Justice, 1978).

A cornerstone of academia and the criminal justice professions is writing well, and according to Lentz (2013), it “is seen as a mark of professionalism and intelligence” (p. 475). Writing well is a necessary requirement in criminal justice academic programs and professional fields. Both students and practitioners are often expected to complete a variety of writing assignments.

This chapter examines helpful tools for writing documents for criminal justice professions and collegiate assignments.

Basic Writing Tools

Like any skill, writing well requires practice and resources. First, one should obtain a useful, current writing style manual, like the one published by the American Psychological Association. Style manuals are easily found in local bookstores and online. Purchasing the most recent edition available and finding one that is easy to use is beneficial to the student writer. An excellent online writing resource is the Purdue Online Writing Lab, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/general_format.html. With some research, other online versions can also be found.

Students should also get a good dictionary. Dictionaries also include proper pronunciation of the word and synonyms for the word. Students should also read the dictionary’s preface and introduction, especially the part that explains the ordering of words that have more than one definition. The editors of some dictionaries place the central or preferred meaning first in the list of definitions; others place the central or preferred meaning last in the list of definitions. Knowing which procedure has been used will help to avoid mistakes. Other specialized dictionaries, such as dictionaries of criminology, law, and sociology, can prove helpful for academic assignments.

Computer spelling programs can be helpful when typing documents, but writers should avoid becoming overly reliant and complacent since these programs will fail to indicate all errors. These programs will not detect improperly used homonyms, for example, such as *there* and *their*, *here* and *hear*, or *too* and *two*.

An English grammar text refreshes writers on matters of punctuation and structure. This text could also serve that purpose. Others are more detailed and better suited for academic needs. A writer can use the grammar text in place of friends and family who may volunteer to help with writing and proofreading. Unfortunately, these people may be unavailable when needed or uninformed about proper writing practices. Only the writer bears the responsibility for his or her writing. Remember, it is the writer’s signature that appears at the bottom of the document, and responsibility for errors cannot be shifted to someone who provided assistance. Writing tools should be kept within easy reach while writing, proofreading, and editing documents. Writers should use these resources frequently.

Figure 3.1 Sample Day Log Sheet

Date_____ Shift_____ Zone_____ Hours_____ Vehicle #_____ Call Sign_____
Times: Received_____ Dispatched_____ Arrived_____ Cleared_____ Arrest_____
Case Number: _____ Report _____ No report_____
Nature of Call:
Location:
Contact:
Notes
Times: Received_____ Dispatched_____ Arrived_____ Cleared_____ Arrest_____
Case Number: _____ Report _____ No report_____
Nature of Call:
Location:
Contact:
Notes

Field Notes

Notes taken during an incident are vital to the accuracy of initial and follow-up reports. Note taking is the process of gathering and recording facts and information relevant to an incident. Police and corrections officers gather a variety of information in a quick and efficient manner, so they may recall the facts of the case to write the incident report, assist follow-up investigations, and refresh their memory for court testimony.

Police officers often use a 6"x9" writing tablet, sometimes called a reporter's notebook, for gathering crime scene notes. Some officers use a digital voice recorder to record notes, crime scene observations, and witness and victim statements.

In practice, field notes should be written in a standard format to record valuable information. A sample note-taking page appears in this chapter as a guide to this practice (see Figure 3.1). The standard format helps officers later when called upon to recall information from on-scene notes. In on-scene notes, police officers may make entries with symbols that only they understand and use flexible shorthand to quickly record data. This is perfectly acceptable because only the officer has to interpret this information from the notes later.

Point of View

Point of view is the position the subject takes in the writing; it is the point from which a story is seen or told. There are first person (*I, me, we*), second person (*you, your, yours*), and third person (*they, them, theirs*) narratives. Many writers in criminal justice have been taught to write in the third person.

Example: This Deputy was traveling west on Oakridge Road. This Deputy observed a small red car traveling west on Oakridge Road. This Deputy activated his emergency lights to initiate a traffic stop.

Some agencies require documents to be written in the third person. The idea is that the writer is supposed to be an impartial observer removed from the incident he or she is reporting. The third person point of view removes the writer from the action; it presents a detached and impersonal attitude. Officers, however, are a vital part of the incident. Although he or she must remain unbiased, documents should be written in the first person (if allowed for by the agency). This point of view is easier for the audience to read and more accurately portrays the writer as an active participant in the incident or investigation.

Third Person: This officer traveled west on Oakridge Road. This officer observed a small red car also traveling west in front of the officer's patrol car. This officer activated the emergency lights at Oakridge Road and Texas Avenue to initiate a traffic stop.

First Person: As I was traveling west on Oakridge Road, I observed a small red car also traveling west in front of me. I activated my emergency lights at Oakridge Road and Texas Avenue to initiate a traffic stop.

Notice how much easier the first person narrative reads and that the subject (*I*) is directly involved in the action. This is a more natural way of writing since it is closer to the way people speak, and readers prefer its more direct approach.

Examples:

1. Deputy Smith processed the scene. (active)
2. The scene was processed by Deputy Smith. (passive)

In Example 1, the subject (Deputy Smith) performs the action (processed). In Example 2, the subject (scene) receives the action (was processed).

Perhaps the best clue to identify a passive sentence is the verb *be*. Almost all passive sentences contain a form of the verb *be*. One-word forms of the verb *be* include *is*, *are*, *am*, *was*, *were*, *being*, and *been*. If a sentence contains a form of the verb *be*, as in Example 2 above (was processed), it is a passive sentence.

A passive sentence may be revised into an active sentence by finding the subject and making it the performer of the action.

Example:

1. The squad was briefed by the sergeant. (passive)
2. The subject (squad) receives the action (was briefed). (passive)
3. The sergeant briefed the squad. (active)

Exercise 3.1

Identify the following sentences as active or passive.

1. I responded to the scene.
2. Upon arriving at the scene, I was contacted by the victim.
3. The victim was interviewed by me.
4. The victim gave a written sworn statement.
5. The statement was notarized by me.

See answers on p. 63.

Table 3.1 Pronouns for Indicating Point of View

First person	<i>I, me, my, we, us, our</i>
Third person	<i>He/him/his, she/her, they/them/their</i>

Writing the Narrative

The Incident Report is a common writing assignment in criminal justice professions and includes a narrative describing an incident. The purpose of the narrative is to convey information to the audience in a clear, concise, and grammatically correct manner. It is the place where the writer becomes a storyteller and has the opportunity to relate the details of the investigation, observations, and actions. It is the most crucial and important part of any criminal justice document. Like any other form of writing, the narrative must have a logical structure to help readers follow the line of reasoning and reach the same or similar conclusion held by the writer. The narrative should have a distinct beginning, middle, and end that consists of an introduction, the body, and a conclusion.

Writing a narrative requires more than just jotting down some information—it is a carefully crafted piece of persuasive writing. Of course, the narrative records data and facts relative to an incident. But it is important that the audience understands the facts of the case, the actions taken by officers, and how and why decisions were made.

For example, if a corrections officer discovered contraband in an inmate's possession, the officer must thoroughly and accurately record all pertinent details of the event. The narrative of the document must contain not only all of the vital case information, but it must also be logically constructed.

Criminal justice academic and professional narratives should follow a chronological order of events that have a distinct beginning (introduction), middle (body), and end (conclusion).

Introduction

The introduction in criminal justice documents is the first paragraph of the document. It is the reader's first exposure to the events about which the officer is writing. In a telephone conversation in which the parties have never met, the callers quickly reach conclusions about each other from voice, word choice, and conversational ability. Readers, too, will quickly form an opinion of the writer's competency as a writer, officer, and investigator from the first few sentences of the document. And this assumption goes well beyond the individual—an officer's reports also present the reader with an image of the criminal justice agency as a whole. Therefore, the officer is obligated personally and professionally to present to the audience the best possible impression. An officer creates this favorable impression not by using fancy words, slang, or jargon. The officer accomplishes a positive impression by presenting the reader with all of the necessary information in a clear and logically presented narrative.

The Audience

Perhaps the most important concept in writing for the criminal justice professions is to always remember who will read the document—the audience. Of course, a supervisor and peers read the reports. Supervisors evaluate an officer's work, investigators use the reports as the foundation for an investigation, and the courts use reports to assess a defendant before and after trial. Probation and parole officers and even prisons see the reports and use information in the reports to make decisions on treatment, rehabilitation, and release from incarceration. But a criminal justice document's audience does not stop there. As a public servant, a criminal justice professional's true audience is the citizens served.

Many criminal justice documents become public record, and as such, they are available for all to review. Attorneys, paralegals, and staff personnel on both sides of a case, as well as judges, may also read criminal justice reports. Imagine if an officer writes a report read by Justices of the Supreme Court, as they did in 1967. In this case, Justices read Cleveland Police Detective Martin McFadden's report about an arrest of a person who was carrying a firearm. This case is known today as *Terry v. Ohio* (1967), or the Stop and Frisk law.

Every piece of writing should reflect the writer's best writing effort. Written documents throughout the criminal justice professions are often the first indicator of professionalism, and sloppy reports give bad images.

A writer should never assume the reader has the same knowledge about the case that he or she does. Therefore, a good introduction starts with a general statement about the case, gives any relevant background information, and focuses upon a thesis statement.

The Thesis Statement

A thesis statement is a clear and concise declaration of the main idea. In addition to helping the reader quickly and easily determine the writing

In the News 3.1

Connecticut State Police report on Sandy Hook shooting response:

<http://www.wtnh.com/news/connecticut/fairfield/connecticut-state-police-release-new-report-on-sandy-hook-shooting-response/1097698678>.

An analysis of submitted reports found writing errors despite having been approved by a supervisor and recommended training to prevent inaccurate and poorly written reports.

There were some issues regarding late reports and the submission of reports that had errors despite having been approved by a

supervisor. The agency should emphasize the importance of report writing competencies and strive to take immediate corrective steps to prevent inaccurate, untimely, and poorly written reports. The agency currently has policies and procedures outlined in the A&O Manual that address reporting requirements, and these policies and procedures should be followed and enforced. Additionally, at the time of the incident certain units did not fully utilize the electronic reporting system, which made it difficult for the assigned investigators to access and review reports.

purpose, it should also help the writer focus on the writing task. A clearly written thesis statement focuses the reader's attention upon the writer's topics.

Examples:

1. The victim, Susan Jones, told me that sometime between 2200 hours on 10/20/02 and 0800 hours on 10/21/02, someone unknown to her unlawfully and without her consent entered her car and removed the stereo from the dash.
2. At 2130 hours on 10/20/02, I arrived at 1234 Main Street and helped Deputy Smith with the arrest of the defendant, Michael Jones.

Although some information such as names, dates, times, and locations may be contained in other areas of a document, officers must reintroduce that information in the narrative's introductory paragraph. The narrative should contain enough details so that it can stand alone without the support of information contained in other areas of the paperwork. This idea follows a key concept of this book—writing in a reader-friendly format that promotes communication and understanding. By reintroducing details, the writer helps the reader follow the narrative without having to leave the page and scan another section for pertinent information.

The Body

The separate paragraphs of the narrative's body should each focus upon a single idea or theme. For example, an officer might dedicate separate paragraphs to discuss an incident scene, a victim's statement, stolen property, or suspects.

A writer should use a topic sentence to focus the main idea of each paragraph. Like a thesis statement, the topic sentence helps both the reader

and writer concentrate on what is to come. It is often the first sentence of the paragraph, and it presents the main idea of the paragraph ahead.

A good topic sentence is written clearly and concisely and identifies the subject or specific issue to be developed. Without some clearly stated direction, a reader is more likely to become confused about the writing. Just as a writer must present the total narrative in a clear and logical order, the writer must also do so within the paragraph. All of the parts of the document must be coherent and fit together so that it makes sense to the reader.

The structure of sentences within the paragraph can follow several models for a logical presentation. A writer can relate the events in chronological, or time, order as they happened. Or the writer might give special prominence to some event and leave the most important information for last. Relating the events as they occurred in a chronological, time-ordered fashion is often the simplest and easiest way to do this.

Conclusion

In the introductory paragraph, a writer would have told the reader what he or she intended to write with a thesis statement. Now, in the conclusion paragraph, the writer must remind the audience of what has been written. A writer can effectively do this by restating the thesis. Rather than simply writing the thesis statement again, though, a writer should retell it in a slightly different fashion. For example, a writer could restate the thesis statement from Example 1 above as follows:

My investigation concludes that unknown suspects did unlawfully and without Susan Jones's consent enter her car and remove the stereo from the dash.

Writing Styles

Writing the narrative in the criminal justice fields is a combination of narrative and descriptive writing styles. Each of these styles is described in this section.

Narration

The dominant writing style in a criminal justice document narrative is narration. Narration tells a story by presenting events in an orderly structure and logical sequence (Kirsznner & Mandell, 2011). To help the reader understand the narrative, events are often presented in chronological order beginning with the writer's initial involvement with the event and ending when the writer completes taking part in official activities.

Descriptive Writing

Criminal justice documents are required to be very detailed and specific about names, times, dates, events, and geographic locations. Descriptive writing uses the five senses—sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell—to tell the audience the physical nature of a person, place, or thing, and in order for

the narrative to be convincing, it must include specific details to help create a picture for the reader (Kirszner & Mandell, 2011). In general, both types of document narratives should follow these rules:

General Report Writing Guidelines

1. Write in first person.
2. Write in the active voice.
3. Write in past tense.
4. Write in chronological or timeline order.
5. Gather all the facts:
 - a. Answer *who, what, when, where, why, and how*.
6. Use proper names instead of *subject, victim, witness*, etc.
7. Ensure proper grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
8. There should be no misspelled words.
9. There should be no abbreviations.
10. Use proper sentence structure:
 - a. Avoid fragments, run-on sentences, and comma splices.
11. Use proper paragraph structure:
 - a. Limit each paragraph to a single topic.
 - b. The first sentence of each paragraph describes the paragraph topic.
12. Include information about assisting officers and witnesses.
13. Structure the report with a distinct beginning, middle, and end.

When writing the report, an officer should use the following format:

Writing the Incident Report

The Beginning

Paragraph 1

1. Background information
 - a. Date
 - b. Time
 - c. Officers involved
 - d. Dispatched or routine patrol
 - e. Office building
 - f. Room or office number
 - g. Address
 - h. Type of call

The Middle

Paragraph 2

What happened when you arrived?

1. What did you see?
 - a. Use descriptive language to paint an overall picture of scene.
2. How many subjects? (use a separate paragraph to describe each subject)
 - a. A brief description of the subjects
 - i. Gender
 - ii. Race
 - iii. Any blood or other evidence of injuries?
3. In a single sentence, what did the first reporter or witness tell you?

If needed, add additional paragraphs for each subject following the format for Paragraph 2.

Paragraph 3

Describe your sensory perception of the scene.

1. What did you hear?
 - a. Arguing, talking
 - i. What was the subject saying?
2. What did you see?
 - a. Fighting or wrestling
 - i. Describe in detail (punching, kicking, biting, throwing objects)
 - ii. Drinking alcohol
 - iii. Injuries
 - iv. Evidence
 - v. Other disruptive or illegal behavior
 - vi. Describe in detail
3. What did you smell?
 - a. Alcohol
 - b. Marijuana
 - c. Urine or feces
 - d. Decomposition
 - e. Other odors
4. What did you touch?
 - a. Items that were hot or cold

- b. Weather conditions (rain, snow, wind, etc.)
- c. Room temperature

Paragraph 4

What did you do?

1. Approach, detain, separate, interview subjects
2. Interviews
 - a. Tell the subject's version of the event.
 - b. What did witnesses tell you?
3. What did you do?
4. Call for assistance or supervisor?
5. Collect evidence
 - a. Photographs
 - b. Other items of value
6. Paperwork
 - a. Obtain sworn, written statements.
 - b. Witness statements
 - c. Trespass warning
 - d. Notice to Appear
 - e. Other official forms
7. Arrest information (if applicable)?
 - a. Name of official charge
 - b. State statute number
 - c. Who transported the subject to the jail?
 - d. How was the subject transported to the jail?
8. Escort from building
 - a. Specifically identify the exit (door number or street name).
 - b. The direction you last saw the subject walking away from the building

The End

Paragraph 5

What did you do after the call?

1. Submit evidence
2. Make the notifications
3. Any other official action that you took

Examples of Poorly Written Incident Reports

Policing

Auto Burglary

On 10–12–95, victim stated that sometime between the date and hours listed above persons unknown smashed out the driver's side window of her described vehicle with unknown tools and removed the listed stereo from the dash. The vehicle was parked in the complex lot at the time of the incident. The value of the stereo is estimated at about \$300. No known suspects or witnesses. The scene was processed with negative results. (Author created.)

Battery

On the above listed date and time, this officer responded to the listed location and met with the victim. Victim stated that at about 0130 hours on the listed date he became involved in a verbal altercation with the suspect. The altercation escalated into a physical disturbance during which the suspect struck the victim in the eye with a closed fist. This officer observed a small amount of bruising and swelling about the victim's eye. Victim stated he did not require medical treatment. No known suspect information or witnesses. See attached victim statement.

Corrections

Battery

On the above date and time I was escorting Nurse Smith for med pass on unit 2. We went into D block for lockdown meds. When going up the left side stairs I could see inmate Jones, John 123456 pacing in his cell 16. He does not receive meds, since I could see he was up and alert I didn't get any closer for an HUS check. As I approached cell 15 I observed Nurse Smith walking up to his cell. I witnessed inmate Jones reach out of his cell and

Exercise 3.2

1. Select a narrative from the examples. How could the writing be improved?
2. As a reader, does the narrative answer all of your questions about what happened?
3. What impressions did you form about the writer? The supervisor who approved the report? And the agency as a whole?
4. If you wrote this narrative, what details would you recall about your investigation one year later if you were called to testify?
5. How much time would it take to write a narrative like the one above? How would you convince a jury or judge that you completed a thorough and detailed investigation but spent only five or ten minutes writing the report?

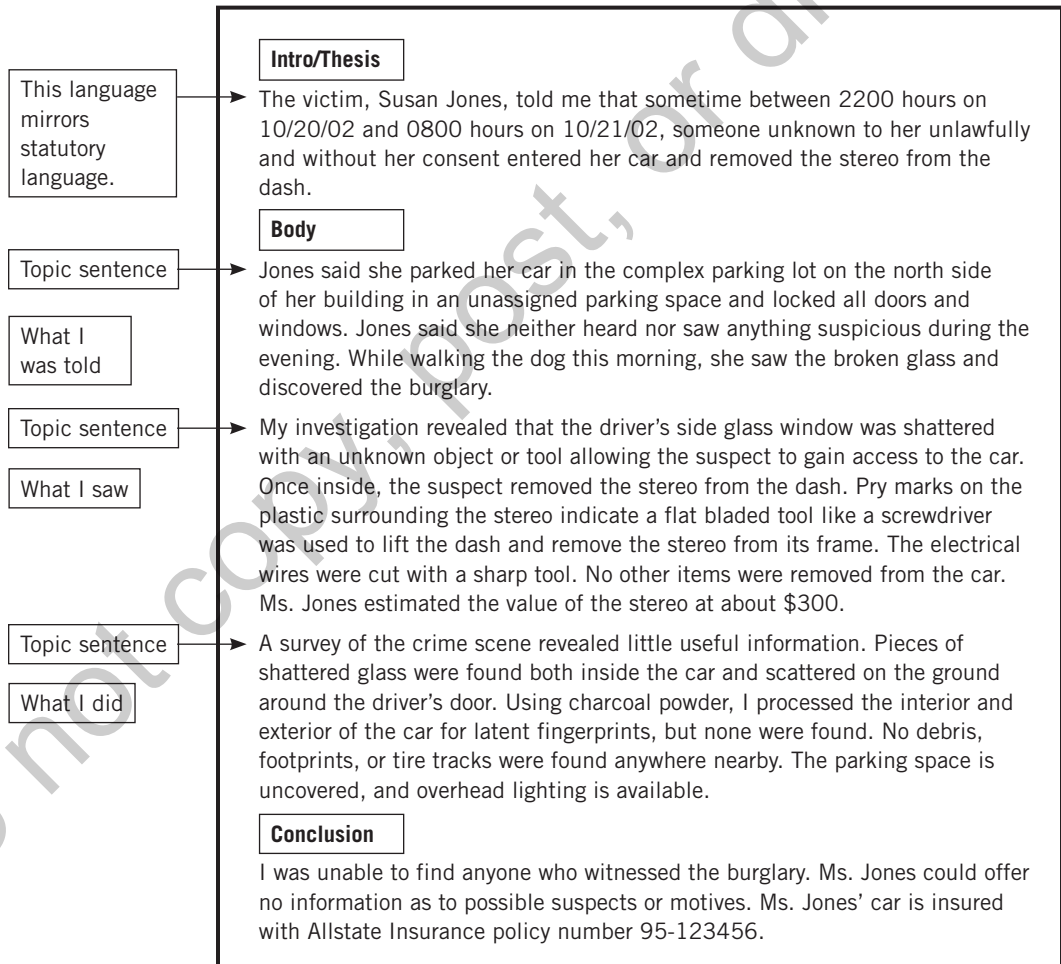
grab Nurse Smith. She jumped back and looked very startled. I immediately removed her from the block. She stated he grabbed me by the shoulder and neck area. Nurse Smith has a visible red mark to her clavicle area. I then escorted her to the clinic and had her seen by clinical staff.

Theft

Offender explained that when he walked on the pod he was told his assigned cell was 210, he was assaulted by several offenders, at which point he was robbed. Offender explained that he had the following items taken from him \$250 worth of canteen, \$60 worth of hygiene, two pair of shoes.

The SAGE Way

Auto Burglary



The following revisions represent a far superior police report. Each of these narratives took just 5 minutes to write.

Policing

Battery

At about 1100 hours on 2-16-02, I met with the victim, John Jones, who told me that he had been injured in a fight with an unknown white male.

Mr. Jones said that at about 0130 hours on 2-15-02, he and a friend, Sam Smith, were at Al's Bar, 1234 Main St., Orlando, Florida. Mr. Jones said he was approached by a white male who accused him of flirting with his girlfriend. Mr. Jones denied the allegation, but the white male persisted. The argument escalated into a fight during which the white male punched Mr. Jones in the left eye. Mr. Smith helped Mr. Jones leave the bar, and no further incident occurred.

I saw a severe amount of bruising and swelling around Mr. Jones' eye. Mr. Jones refused medical treatment but said he wanted to press charges. Mr. Jones said he could identify the white male who struck him. Mr. Smith confirmed Mr. Jones' story and said he also could identify the suspect. Both men said they have seen the suspect at Al's Bar in the past. Statements are attached from both Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith.

Criminal Mischief

The Victim, Susan Jones, said that she parked her 1995 Ford Taurus in the assigned space in her apartment complex at about 2200 hours on 3-12-02. The space is located on the north side of her apartment building and is in a well-lighted area. When she walked outside at about 0700 on 3-13-02 to go to work, she found the driver's door window was smashed out.

The window was damaged with an unknown tool. I processed the vehicle for latent fingerprints without success. Ms. Jones estimated the damage at about \$200. Ms. Jones could offer no suspect or motive information. I asked several area residents if they had seen or heard any unusual activity, but no one had. It appears this incident is a random act.

Corrections

Battery

On 03/05/2018, I escorted Nurse Smith for medication distribution to inmates in unit 2. While in Unit D, I saw inmate John Jones, inmate number 123456, pacing in his cell, cell 16. Jones does not receive medication. As I approached cell 15, I saw Smith walking up to cell 16. I saw Jones reach out of his cell and grab Smith. She jumped back and looked very startled. I immediately escorted Jones out of Unit D. Smith said Jones grabbed her by the shoulder and neck. I saw a red mark in the area of Smith's clavicle. I then escorted her to the clinic to be treated by clinical staff.

There was no indication of serious injuries at the time of this report. Nurse White and Dr. Allen treated Jones at the clinic. Jones said she did not want to press charges. Jones was moved from D block, cell 16 and placed in segregation pending an administrative discipline review.

Exercise 3.3

Select one narrative and respond to the following questions:

1. Is this narrative organized, cohesive, informative, and persuasive?
2. As a reader, does it answer all of your questions about what happened?
3. What impressions did you form about the writer? From the supervisor who approved the report? From the agency as a whole?
4. If you wrote this report, what details would you recall about your investigation 1 year later if you were called to testify?
5. How much time would it take to write a narrative like the one above? Could you easily convince a jury or judge that you took the time to complete a thorough and detailed investigation of this case? Why?

Robbery

At about 1100 hours on 03/05/2018, I met with Inmate Smith in the interview room of Pod D. Smith stated that at about 1600 hours on 03/04/2018, Inmate Jones stole \$250 dollars in canteen funds from him. Smith said Jones followed him into his cell, Pod D, cell 16, held him against the cell wall, and took his canteen card. He said about 10 inmates stood outside the cell so he could not seek help from staff. Jones told Smith he would be physically harmed by “his people” if Smith reported the incident to staff. Smith said he was not physically injured during the incident.

At about 1500 hours on 03/05/2018, Pod D was placed on lockdown so that all cells could be searched. Officer Green conducted the search and searched cell 12, which Jones is assigned to. During the search of cell 12, Green discovered Smith’s canteen card hidden inside a small stack of letter paper. No other contraband items were found in cell 12 during the search. Jones was moved to segregation pending further investigation.

Smith refused to sign a written statement. Photos of cell 12 and Smith’s canteen card were submitted as evidence.

Eliminate Slang and Jargon

As in any profession, criminal justice practitioners develop a way of talking to their colleagues. The slang, jargon, and even 10-codes of the policing profession have a way of creeping into documents and speech. At times, speaking with slang and jargon is advantageous. This presents a serious problem, though, for those who have no knowledge about these professions. Some officers try to impress readers with a professional vocabulary or jargon. Officers would do better, though, to write a clear and easily readable report. Writing is about communication, and slang and jargon frequently becomes confusing to the reader.

A writer must always keep the audience—the reader—in mind. Many people beyond peers and supervisors—people outside the police profession—will read criminal justice documents. Most often, those readers are not criminal justice practitioners. These include prosecution and defense attorneys, judges, social workers, news media personnel, and the public. When writing, a writer should never forget the audience!

Below are some of the words most frequently used as jargon in criminal justice documents. One can usually replace these words with simpler words that are easily understood by a general audience. Remember, professional does not mean convoluted or fancy.

Instead of these wordy, ambiguous terms . . .	Use these easily understood words instead.
stated	said
verbalized	
related	
transpired	happened
exited	got out
responded	went, drove
responded to	went to (give specific location)
the area of	started
initiated	
instigated	
commenced	tried
attempted	
made an effort	
monitored	watched
surveilled	
altercation	fight
physical disturbance	
mutual combat	
struggle	
closed fist	
open fist	fist
struck	
battered	
contacted	hit
implement	
device	
at this point	then
at this time	

requested	asked
inquired	
was in possession of	had
possessed	
was running in a northerly direction	ran north
fled the scene	left
fled	
exited	
fled on foot	ran away
assistance	help
via land line	phoned
contacted by phone	
verbal altercation	argument
verbal dispute	
verbal confrontation	
intoxicated	drunk
smelled the odor of alcoholic impurities	smelled alcohol
appeared	looked like
seemed like	
located	found
discovered	
established	set up
possessed	had
possession	
victim	use specific name if known
suspect	
witness	
defendant	
contacted	met
made contact with	
prior to	before
previously	
in reference to	about
reference	
in regard to	
interviewed	asked
interrogated	
questioned	

(Continued)

Table 3.2 (Continued)

Instead of these wordy, ambiguous terms . . .	Use these easily understood words instead.
the area of	omit the phrase and give specific location
had the odor/taste	smelled/tasted/looked like
appearance of	
felt cold to the touch	felt cold
blue in color	blue
colored blue	
round in shape	round
vehicle	car, truck, van, etc.
gained entry	entered
utilized	used
removed	took
observed	saw
viewed	
perceived	
placed under arrest	arrested
placed	
via	by
in lieu of	instead
currency	money
informed	told
advised	
transported	taken
convey	
conveyance	house, car
was in fear	feared
was unable to locate	could not find
purchased	bought
transaction	deal
for the purpose of	to
conversed with	talked to
engaged in conversation with	
investigative funds	money
serialized US currency	
subject	person
obtain	get
I conducted a presumptive chemical test on the suspected cocaine	I tested the cocaine
the result of the test was positive for the presence of cocaine	the test was positive

Eliminate Emotion

In face-to-face conversation, emotional content is communicated through tone of voice, facial expression, and body language (Melé, 2009). In written documents, the writer expresses emotion through tone. According to Baldick (1996), tone refers to the author's attitude toward the reader or subject matter. The tone of a narrative "affects the reader just as one's tone of voice affects the listener in everyday exchanges" (Ober, 1995). Writers of criminal justice narratives should strive for an overall tone that reflects an impartial, courteous, fair observer, that contains nondiscriminatory language and an appropriate level of difficulty for the audience (Ober, 1995).

Answer the Interrogatives

Interrogatives introduce questions. They are the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how* required in many criminal justice documents. The following is a partial list of basic interrogatives.

Who

1. Who is the victim, witness, suspect, or defendant?
2. Who called the police or reported the crime?
3. Who are the other officers who assisted your investigation?
4. Who are the medical personnel who treated any injuries?
5. Who discovered the event or crime?
6. Who was the first to arrive at the scene?
7. Who transported the injured to the hospital?
8. Who transported the defendant to the jail?
9. Who discovered or recovered the evidence?
10. Who submitted the evidence for retention?
11. To whom was the evidence submitted?
12. Who photographed the crime scene?
13. Who is the investigator that assisted?
14. If a K-9 was used, what is the handler's and dog's name?
15. Who conducted the breath test? (DUI)
16. Who signed the search/arrest warrant?
17. Who authorized the use of the technique/procedure?
18. Who was the undercover officer?
19. Who were the backup officers?
20. Who comprised the entry team?

What

1. What is the incident?
2. What happened first?
3. What weapons or tools were used to facilitate the crime?
4. What involvement did the victim have in the incident? Was there any victim/perpetrator confrontation?
5. What happened next?
6. What drugs were used?
7. What name brand chemical presumptive test kit was used to test the drugs?
8. What injuries did the victim receive?
9. What treatment did the injured receive?
10. What Rescue Unit, medical facility, or hospital treated the injured?
11. What wrecker company towed the vehicle?
12. What observations did you make?
13. What action did you take?
14. What weapons did you use?
15. What questions did you ask the defendant?
16. What is the victim's relationship to the defendant/suspect?
17. What property was stolen?
18. What was the suspect wearing/driving?
19. What was the motive?
20. What path did the vehicle pursuit take?

When

1. When did the incident occur?
2. When was the incident first discovered? reported?
3. When was the incident first reported to the criminal justice agency?
4. When was the officer dispatched to the call?
5. When did the officer arrive at the scene?
6. When did the officer clear the call?
7. When was the suspect located?
8. When was the evidence discovered?
9. When did the injured receive medical treatment?

10. When was the deceased pronounced dead?
11. When was the arrest made?
12. When was the property impounded/released?
13. When was the suspect interviewed?
14. When did the suspect confess?
15. When was the suspect advised of Miranda rights?
16. When was the juvenile released to the custody of parents?
17. When was the victim first told of the crime?
18. When was the stolen property recovered?
19. When were the drugs bought?
20. When did the undercover operation take place?

Where

1. Where did the incident take place?
2. Where was the victim at the time of the crime or incident?
3. Where was the location of the crime or incident?
4. Where was the car towed to?
5. Where was the victim found?
6. Where was the suspect found/arrested?
7. Where was the evidence found?
8. Where was the evidence submitted for retention/analysis?
9. Where was the defendant given a chemical breath analysis?
10. Where were the witnesses in relation to the incident?
11. Where were the injured treated?
12. Where did the officer conduct any follow-up investigation?
13. Where was lighting located near the scene?
14. From where did the victim first report the incident?
15. Where did the victim go after the crime?
16. Where were other surveillance units positioned?
17. Where did the officer receive specialized training for the technique/procedure used?
18. From where did the officer respond?
19. Where was the defendant transported?
20. Where was the suspect interviewed?

Why

1. Why did the crime occur? (motive)
2. Why did the victim wait to report the crime?
3. Why did the victim/suspect react the way they did?
4. Why did the officer respond the way he/she did?
5. Why did the suspect confess?
6. Why is the informant motivated to give information?
7. Why were authorized weapons used by officers?
8. Why did the criminal attempt succeed/fail?
9. Why were specialized units requested?
10. Why were federal agencies involved in the investigation?
11. Why was the officer involved in the incident?
12. Why is the officer writing this report?
13. Why did the defendant resist arrest?
14. Why was the suspect involved in the crime?
15. Why was the officer ordered to take/stop some action?
16. Why was the officer in the area of the incident?
17. Why did the officer stop the suspect?
18. Why was the officer in fear?
19. Why did the officer detain the suspect?
20. Why did the officer release the suspect?

How

1. How did the incident occur?
2. How did the suspect gain entry/exit?
3. How was the incident discovered?
4. How was the property removed from the scene?
5. How was the incident reported?
6. How long did the incident last?
7. How was the suspect dressed?
8. How were weapons used?
9. How did the victim defend himself or flee?

10. How did the officer respond to the victim's/suspect's requests for help?
11. How did the confrontation begin/end?
12. How was the defendant subdued/restrained?
13. How was the item removed?
14. How did the injury/death occur?
15. How were vehicles used to facilitate the crime?
16. How many officers/units assisted in the investigation?
17. How much contraband was seized?
18. How much did the drugs weigh?
19. How much money was spent during the investigation?
20. How much was the informant paid?

Editing

There are three parts to the writing process—prewriting or planning, writing, and rewriting or editing. Every written document should be edited. Editing is often more than simply proofreading for basic errors. For many writers, editing involves major structural and thematic revisions.

This type of major writing surgery is very easy if you are fortunate enough to write criminal justice documents with a computer. Studies have found computer-aided writers make more changes to their work and revise at all stages of their writing (Carole & Richard, 1988). Rather than waiting to revise until the project is completed, as do most hand writers, the computer-aided writer effectively revises while writing. Menu bar and function key options that aid editing and revision include spell check, grammar check, format, text insert and delete, and text scanning methods.

While many writers fear the blank page and find getting started difficult, the computer, with all its writer's aids, seems to invite writing since the text is manipulated on the screen before it even touches the page. And once the writer understands the function keys, moving through the text to revise becomes easier. Rather than writing and erasing, or sometimes starting all over as in a hand-written document, the insert, delete, and move text functions can make revision easier.

Those who write by hand can still effectively edit their work and submit well-written, organized, and error-free reports. Editing should be done at three levels to include word level, sentence level, and global revisions.

Word-Level Editing

A writer should never go to work without a bag of writing tools. Basic writing tools should include a dictionary (either a paperback or an electronic version), a thesaurus, and this book or another grammar or writing handbook.

Even though a thesaurus is useful, a writer should be cautious when using one. A writer should not overly rely upon the thesaurus as a tool to eliminate repetition of key words or phrases in reports. While a thesaurus is a useful tool, it can, like anything else, be abused. An experienced reader will quickly spot dependence, and view this as a weakness in word choice and writing skills.

Sentence-Level Editing

A writer should scan the document narrative quickly but thoroughly paying particular attention to the sentence structure such as run-ons, comma splices, and fragments. He or she should also consult a grammar book for questions concerning sentence structure, the use of commas, and other structural devices that may not be familiar. Effective writers often seek resources such as these to help correct and improve their writing.

Global Editing

Rereading the narrative again, paying particular attention to structure and organization, is imperative. The writer should ask if it has a clear beginning, middle, and end. Is there a clear thesis statement in the introduction and a restatement of the thesis in the conclusion? Is the body logically structured with each paragraph focusing on a single main topic? Is each paragraph focused and introduced by using a clearly written topic sentence? If not, the writer should make any necessary changes.

A writer should never write anything without first planning the structure of the work. The type of incident being documented will often dictate the structure of the report. Sometimes a writer will be able to decide what format to follow, while other times he or she may not. The only rule to follow here is that the organization is logical and easy for readers to follow.

When editing for content, a writer should read the report first from beginning to end while asking himself or herself the six interrogative questions: *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*. The writer should read quickly but efficiently to determine if he or she has answered everything that someone unfamiliar with the event would want to know. Is there anything more that could be added that would make the document more complete and easier to understand? Any omissions should be corrected at this point.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Writing well requires a process of planning, writing, and editing. Whether putting pen to paper or writing electronically, producing the best written work cannot be accomplished by simply writing alone. The written report is where an officer becomes a storyteller and engages the audience. The report should be written chronologically in narrative format to tell a story using descriptive words. Officers should follow general writing

guidelines, eliminate slang, jargon, and emotion, and answer all appropriate interrogatives. All writing must be written in standard English and error free. Finally, a well-written document requires editing. Writers should edit every written document at the word and sentence level as well as globally. Following these guidelines will help writers produce quality writing that reflects positively on themselves and the agency.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Why is style an important aspect of writing in criminal justice? Include a discussion of narrative and descriptive writing and tone.
2. Define point of view. What is first-person and third-person point of view? What is the preferred point of view (if agency policy permits)?
3. Define thesis statement. Why is it important? Where in the report should it be included?
4. What is police jargon? List three to five examples and alternative words that are easier for the audience to understand.
5. Describe the three parts of the writing process.
6. What is the focus of each editing level? Why is the focus of each level important?

EXERCISE 3.1 ANSWERS

1. active
2. passive
3. passive
4. active
5. passive