Metropolitan Police Academy

3.1 Basic Report Writing

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Introduction

Completing a comprehensive and well-written report is essential for a Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) officer. It is how we document all information and facts to ensure all stakeholders have the required information for the criminal justice process. The bulk of an officer's report-writing activity involves documenting incidents and crimes involving the public. Many such reports form the basis for the successful criminal prosecution of suspects arrested for these crimes. They serve as the public's official record of events, including the agency's response to those incidents. The courts, attorneys, private companies, the media, and the public can request and review MPD reports. Even with modern data entry technologies such as Mark43, it is still up to officers to compose a narrative that relates the facts of an incident in an organized and objective manner. It is critical that the facts of a reported incident are properly organized, with attention to detail.

3.1.1 Define a report, its functions, and value

A report is an account or statement describing an event or situation in detail. An incident report, also called an offense report, is MPD's official record of an event. Reports range from documentation of a minor loss or accident to documentation of a major criminal event. Most of an MPD officer's time will be spent documenting incidents and crimes involving the public. Some of these reports will become the foundation of criminal cases adjudicated in the DC Superior Court.

Police reports may be used in a variety of ways. For example, they will often be used internally for administrative purposes. Administrative reports document something as simple as a tree branch falling on a police cruiser or an officer losing their flashlight during a foot chase. Damage to Property and Lost Property Reports (PD 43) are important official documents that chronicle events that occur at MPD. These reports justify agency action in response, such as repairing a cruiser, replacing a flashlight, or other basic operational necessities that a police agency encounters. Police reports are also the basis for actions by police supervisors.

A well-written and thought-out report presents the facts explaining actions taken by police officers. How was a police flashlight lost? What underlying criminal matter preceded a police officer's use of force? An accurate report is essential to the agency action required to account for such events. A supervisor will use the reports to determine whether further training, corrective action, or government expenditures are justified, so accuracy is vital.

Individuals outside of MPD also review agency reports. For example, attorneys and prosecutors review police reports daily. These reports help determine whether criminal or civil litigation will be pursued involving reported incidents. An accurate and well-written report can determine whether a high-profile criminal case leads to a successful prosecution. Alternatively, a poorly written police report can create unnecessary litigation for the Department, the DC government, or a private party. Reports comprise the foundation of many cases at the DC Superior Court and the US District Court for the District of Columbia. Reports may be scrutinized by the public or media and may be used in formal court proceeding.

With the increasing scrutiny of police departments around the country by the press, police reports are constantly being requested to establish basic facts surrounding potentially controversial events. A properly written report can prevent misunderstandings and unneeded controversy in questionable incidents. There are basic steps to writing a good report.

3.1.2 Differentiate the basic steps of report writing

The first step to writing a good report is documenting the factual details of the incident/offense.

- Name/address/date of birth (DOB)/phone number/email of involved persons (witness and offender)
- Suspect description
- Relationships of involved persons to each other
- Type of call/problem/issue/classification
- Details of the incident, including **who, what, when, where, how,** and **why** (if known)
- Observations/perceptions
- Officer action taken, including investigation and response/action of other personnel
- Injuries/medical treatment information
- Nature of property damage, if any
- Description of evidence/property seized/stolen/found

The next step is to evaluate this information properly and classify it according to DC laws and MPD directives. Using these laws and directives, the officer must decide the best course of action to pursue. The facts and circumstances obtained by the officer will allow a proper classification after the officer has evaluated the relevant information. Officer notes will become discoverable material in the prosecution of criminal cases.

After an MPD officer has determined the appropriate classification of an incident/offense, it is incumbent upon them to broadcast this information in certain instances. This can help other units canvass for suspects and recognize crime patterns. Once this has been done, actual report writing can take place.

3.1.3 Describe chronologically structured narratives

The narrative is the section that most people are interested in reading. The narrative is the officer's documented account of who, what, when, where, how, and why. It should be clear, concise, and easy to understand.

The narrative must be written in chronological order. What initially happened must be written before justifying an arrest is mentioned. What caused the incident to happen must be written before the result. It is especially important for narratives in the Arrest Report (PD 163) to unfold the events so that anyone not present can see how an officer came to the conclusion (arrest).

3.1.4 Discuss the Department's standard identifiers used in report writing

MPD has strict requirements regarding the standard identifiers used in MPD reports. Uniformity of identifiers allows MPD reports to be read consistently and without confusion between terms.

The identifiers are as follows:

Complainant	C1, C2 or C3	A party who is a victim or who has a direct stake in the matter.
Victim	V1	A person who the crime was committed against
Suspect (Subject)	S1, S2, S3	A person who is believed to have committed a crime (not used in the arrest narrative)
Witness	W1, W2, W3	A person who sees or hears an event or its aftermath.
Defendant	D1, D2, D3	An adult suspect who has been arrested for the commission of a crime. (Used in the arrest narrative)
Respondent	R1, R2, R3	A juvenile who is arrested for the commission of a crime.
Reporting Person	RP1	A person making a report on behalf of another who is either unable or is not available to make the report
Missing Person	M1, M2	A person who is or was missing.
Vehicle	VEH 1	A vehicle.

A sample incident listed in a public narrative:
> C1 reports that the listed damage to VEH1 occurred by unknown means.

A sample offense listed in a public narrative:
> C1 reports that S1 smashed the passenger-side window of VEH1 and stole the listed items. A canvass produced no witnesses at this time.

NOTE: These reports address the basic questions of who, what, when, where, how, and why.

3.1.5   Assess the documents used for writing event reports

Standard types of MPD Reports include:

- **Initial Report:** This type of report documents all incidents or offenses when an MPD officer first responds. The public narrative must include information about each element of the crime. For example, "V-1 reports that S-1 entered the bedroom and struck her multiple times in the face with a fist…"

- **Internal Report:** This type of report is a supplemental report that records additional information relating to incidents or offenses in initial reports. This includes canvass results, additional eyewitness accounts, etc. Internal reports are also used to change the initial report's classification if need be. Supplemental reports are made directly to the original report on Mark43.

- **Arrest Report:** This type of report documents arrests and presents information to a prosecutor to charge a suspect as an adult and must establish probable cause. An arrest report may also be used to document arrests and present information to a prosecutor to charge a juvenile.

- **Traffic Crash Report:** This type of report documents certain vehicular collisions that occur in Washington, DC.

- **Property Record** (PD 81): All property that MPD takes possession of is recorded on this form. Examples include evidence, recovered stolen autos, found property, etc.

3.1.6 Demonstrate spelling and grammar in report writing

Writing a report that effectively presents the facts surrounding an incident and uses correct spelling and grammar is imperative. A report lacking proper spelling and grammar lacks credibility. Common grammatical issues include:

Spelling
Below are some commonly misspelled words:

Use i before e except after c
- Unless used as a, as in neighbor or weigh
- Except, of course, for the exceptions (seize, either, weird, height, foreign, leisure, conscience, counterfeit, forfeit, neither, science, species, sufficient)

Missing silent e (for example, quit – quite, bit – bite, cut – cute)

Changing y to i before a suffix (for example: family – families, dry – driest, fry – fried, happy – happily)

Double consonants (for example, dropped, blessed, flagging, dessert)

Plurals: s or es, or no change (for example, potato – potatoes, splash – splashes, bus – buses, police – police)

Homophones are words that sound alike and are commonly confused (for example, two/to/too, their/there/they're, affect/effect, its/it's)

A lot - This is always written as two words.

Proper Capitalization
Make sure you have capitalized appropriately. You'll need a capital letter for:

- The beginning of a sentence
- Proper nouns
- Titles (of both people and written works)

Punctuation

Check your work for missing or incorrectly used punctuation. Here are some of the more common errors:
- Comma misuse (this is the most common one)
- A missing question mark at the end of a question
- Missing a period at the end of a sentence
- Colon and semi-colon misuse

Verb Tenses

The verb tenses within a sentence should be compatible. This is called parallelism. For example:
- George wants to go to a movie today, but I want to do something outdoors.
- The students were whispering to each other when the teacher was speaking.

As well, you shouldn't unnecessarily switch verb tenses within the text.
- Once upon a time, there was a little dog. The dog was black and brown, with some white stripes. The dog liked to walk in the park, where he would chase other dogs.

Vocabulary and Word Choice

Use appropriate vocabulary with minimal police jargon.

Make sure you've used the right words to explain yourself. There are several different things to consider for vocabulary:
- **Vocabulary for audience**
  Have you used clear and simple terminology so that most people will understand the text? Who is your intended audience? Does the terminology used give the most information possible?
- **Vocabulary for subject**
  Have you used the vocabulary generally used to discuss your subject? If you've written a police report about a theft, have you used the words suspect, stolen, and property? If not, do you have a good reason for not doing so?

Sentence Structure
- Use introductory words or phrases occasionally.
- For emphasis, use a very short sentence beside a longer, more complex sentence.
- Use punctuation to help vary the sentence structure.
- Make sure the verb tenses in complex sentences are parallel.
- Verb tenses should be compatible.
- Verb forms should be similar (e.g., all ending with ed, or all ending with ing).
- In a list, articles (a, an, the) do not need to be repeated.
- Comparisons should be made in similar form (I like apple pie, and she prefers cherry. I like apple pie, and she likes cherry.).

Transitions

Do your sentences flow smoothly from one to the next? Are your paragraphs linked? Are the separate sections clearly identified but arranged in some logical order? Make sure the text reads effortlessly as a whole. If you find the text a little choppy, try evening it out with some transitional words or phrases such as:

- Words that lead to more of the same idea: again, likewise, in addition, also, as well, furthermore, moreover, and
- Words that lead to a different idea: conversely, nevertheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, although, even though, but, yet, while, however, except
- Words that lead to a result: thus, therefore, consequently, as a result, because, since, as, so, in as much as
- Words that lead to an example: for example, to illustrate, if one looks at, as shown by
- Words that refer to a previous time: previously, before, prior to
- Words that refer to the future: next, then, later, afterward
- Words that refer to the same time: while, as, at the same time, during that time
- Words that show sequence: first/second/third, a/b/c, lastly, next, then, finally, after that, until

Once your report is finished, proofread it to check for spelling, grammatical errors, and coherence.

3.1.7 Describe the Department policy on report taking

Report writing must conform to MPD policies and procedures. All reported offenses and many specified incidents require MPD officers to complete a report. These reports result from either calls-for-service or self-initiated responses. Any follow-up by the officer also must be documented. Initial reports must provide sufficient information so an investigator or other MPD members can complete a supplementary report. Offense reports must describe offenses based on the DCMR, DC, or US code. Any reports initiated during your tour of duty must be completed before you check off duty. You will not be allowed to "check off" without having completed your reports. All reports must be accurate. Members are reminded not to review their BWC recordings and recordings shared with them to assist in initial report writing. Initial reports are those written in response to calls for service or self-initiated police actions that document an event (e.g., records management system reports, notices of infraction, arrestee injury/illness reports, FD-12s, and force incident reports). Members are reminded that they may view BWC recordings after the initial report is complete and when writing subsequent reports, to include, but not be limited to, assisting with testifying in court, preparing supplemental reports, providing a statement, training, debriefing, completing case management documentation (including initial case resumes), and when they are the subject of criminal or administrative investigations according to GO-SPT-302.13 (Body Warn Camera Program). **When writing subsequent reports, members shall indicate if the member viewed BWC footage before writing the subsequent report and specify what BWC footage the member viewed.**

3.1.8   Distinguish between internal and external reports

Officers need to keep in mind what information becomes public. The public narrative portion of a report is available to everyone. Any sensitive information should only be noted in the internal narrative. In addition, arrest reports and juvenile delinquency reports (PD163/PD379s) are not public documents. Personal information from reports is not available to the public and is never listed in the public narrative. This is particularly true of identifying witness information.

Summary

By the end of this lesson, students should become adept at writing clear, concise, and chronological narratives. This lesson builds on the good notebook habits initially learned in prior lessons. A well-written narrative is the basis for many future situations a recruit will encounter at the Metropolitan Police Academy. During your time at the academy, you will have many opportunities to practice writing public and internal narratives.

References

GO 302.13	Body Worn Cameras	12/18/2023
GO 304.11	Intra-family Offenses	07/14/2022
GO 401.01	Field Reporting System	07/19/2012
Teletype 11-036-12	Modifications to Arrests	11/08/2012
GO 803.06	Command Information Center	05/19/2015
Teletype 08-065-14	Witness/Complainant info on 379's	08/18/2014