

# The Basics of Writing

There is an adage in criminal justice that “if it’s not in writing, it didn’t happen.” This means that criminal justice documents must provide enough details to explain what actually happened at a scene or during an incident or court hearing. Missing details or information that is written vaguely may result in a case being dismissed. Further, a poorly written report could open the door for a mistrial, a not guilty verdict, or the criminal justice worker may appear to have made up the details or to be unsure of the reported details when testifying on the stand. Therefore, it is important that those working in criminal justice understand the complexities of writing quality reports.

Criminal justice officers are required to write many different types of narrative and descriptive documents. In policing and corrections, the basic incident report documents the officer’s or inmate’s activity; records the actions and testimony of victims, suspects, and witnesses; serves as a legal account of an event; and is used for court testimony or in parole hearings. Being the best writer possible is a necessity for professionals in the criminal justice field.

The need to write well has never been more important. Relating facts about an incident and investigation go far beyond the eyes of the supervisor and agency. A report will convict criminals, encourage the support of the community, and become a guide by which the public and the courts will measure their respect for the criminal justice system and its workers.

Additionally, criminal justice reports are public record in many states. As such, they are available for all to review. Attorneys, paralegals, and staff personnel on both sides of a case, as well as judges and journalists, may read criminal justice reports. Imagine writing a report that is read by a Justice of the Supreme Court!

Similarly, criminal justice professors often require students to complete writing assignments such as essays, case analyses, and legal briefs. These assignments help develop critical thinking skills, as well as research and writing skills required in criminal justice careers.

This chapter introduces students to common writing assignments in the criminal justice and criminology classroom, as well as those required in the criminal justice professions.

## Basic Grammar Rules

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Studies suggest successful writing skills take much longer to develop. Learning to write an effective, extended text is a vastly complex process that often requires more than two decades of training. A skilled, professional

writer progresses beyond writing to tell a story by crafting the narrative with the audience's interpretation of the text in mind (Kellogg, 2008). Paragraphs and sentences form the basis of the text. Writing clear, short sentences is an important element of technical writing.

Any discussion on writing begins with the sentence.

## The Sentence

The sentence comprises a subject and a predicate, and the unit must make complete sense. In other words, a sentence must be able to stand alone as a complete thought. Sentences can be one word or a complex combination of words. Criminal justice professionals write all documents using complete sentences, usually in the first person with no slang or jargon. On occasion, corrections documents may be written in the third person, although still with complete sentences that include a subject and a predicate. Sentences should be brief with no structural, grammatical, or spelling errors. The writer must write clear, complete sentences so that the audience can easily understand the writing.

## The Subject

The subject is the word that states who or what does the action or is acted upon by the verb. The subject can be expressed or implied. Rephrase the following sentences as questions to identify the subject. So, for number 1, for example, one could ask, "Who reported the crime?" The answer, of course, is the victim, and in this sentence, "victim" functions as the subject.

Examples:

1. The *victim* reported the crime.  
Who reported the crime? The victim.
2. *I* responded to the scene.
3. *I* arrested the defendant.
4. *Deputy Smith* read the defendant his Miranda rights.
5. The *suspect* entered the vehicle through the driver's door.

If a sentence requires a subject and a predicate, can one word function as a complete sentence? Yes, if that word is a command. In a command, the subject is the implied or understood "you."

Examples:

1. "Stop!"  
The subject is not clearly stated, but it is implied or understood to be "you."
2. "Sit down!"
3. "Halt!"

## The Verb

The verb is the word or group of words that describes what action is taking place.

Examples:

1. The Deputy *drove*.  
*Drove* tells what action the subject (Deputy) did.
2. The Deputy *was dispatched* to the call.  
*Was dispatched* tells what action is taking place.
3. I *arrested* the defendant.
4. *Stop!*  
Remember the subject in a command is the implied “you.”
5. I *did not respond* to the call.

## Standing Alone and Making Complete Sense

A complete sentence must have a subject and a verb, and it must make complete sense. The sentence must be a complete idea; it must be able to stand alone as a complete thought.

Examples:

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| Incorrect 1. | The agent.   |
|              | The subject (agent) lacks a verb and does not make complete sense.   |
| Incorrect 2. | The agent purchased.   |
|              | The subject (agent) and verb (purchased) lacks complete sense.   |
| Correct 3.   | The agent purchased cocaine. (complete sentence)   |
| Incorrect 4. | The agent arrested.  |
|              | The subject (agent) and verb (arrested) lacks complete sense.  |
| Correct 5.   | The agent arrested the defendant. (complete sentence)  |
| Incorrect 6. | The Deputy who responded to the scene.<br>(incomplete sentence)  |
| Correct 7.   | The Deputy who responded to the scene arrested the defendant. (complete sentence)                          |
| Correct 8.   | The agent was working. (complete sentence)   |
| Correct 9.   | The agent was working in an undercover capacity.<br>(complete sentence)                                    |
| Correct 10.  | The agent was working in an undercover capacity for the purpose of purchasing cocaine. (complete sentence) |

## Exercise 1.1

Identify the subject and verb in each of the following examples.

*I arrested the defendant.*

I (subject) + arrested (verb).

1. The defendant entered the victim's vehicle.
2. The defendant smashed the driver's door window.
3. He removed a stereo from the dash.
4. The stereo is valued at \$300.00.
5. I processed the scene for latent prints.
6. The defendant punched the victim in the face.
7. The suspect removed the victim's bicycle from the garage.
8. I responded to the scene.
9. I arrested the defendant.
10. I transported the defendant to Central Booking for processing.

See answers on p. 22.

### Structural Errors

Some of the most common structural errors in criminal justice and academic writing are fragments, run-on sentences, and comma splices. But once identified, they are easily corrected.

### Fragments

A fragment is an incomplete sentence.

All of the following are fragments:

1. Entered the vehicle. (no subject)
2. Processed the scene. (no subject)
3. I the scene. (no verb)
4. At the scene. (no subject or verb)
5. I processed. (lacks completeness)

Fragments can be corrected in any one of several ways. After identifying the missing element (subject, verb, or completeness), simply insert the missing element to complete the sentence.

- Revised 1. The defendant entered the vehicle.  
Revised 2. A crime scene technician processed the scene.  
Revised 3. I responded to the scene.  
Revised 4. The defendant was found at the scene.  
Revised 5. I processed the scene.

## Run-On Sentences

A run-on sentence is two or more complete sentences improperly joined without punctuation.

Example 1: We arrived at the scene Deputy Smith interviewed the victim.

Sentence 1: We arrived at the scene.

Sentence 2: Deputy Smith interviewed the victim.

Revision Strategy 1. Create two independent sentences.

Revision 1. We arrived at the scene. Deputy Smith interviewed the victim.

Revision Strategy 2. Join the independent clauses with a comma and a coordinating conjunction such as *and*, *but*, *for*, *nor*, *or*, *so*, or *yet*.

Revision 2. We arrived at the scene, and Deputy Smith interviewed the victim.

*Punctuation Alert!* Always place the comma *before* the coordinating conjunction.

Revision Strategy 3. Join the independent clauses with a semicolon if they are closely related ideas.

Revision 3. We arrived at the scene; Deputy Smith interviewed the victim.

## Comma Splices

A comma splice is two independent clauses joined improperly with a comma.

Example 1. We arrived at the scene, Deputy Smith interviewed the victim.

Revision Strategy 1. Separate the two sentences by adding a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction before “Deputy Smith.”

Revised 1. We arrived at the scene, and Deputy Smith interviewed the victim.

## Punctuation

All sentences contain punctuation. Punctuation helps the audience understand the writer’s meaning.

Let's eat Grandma.  
Let's eat, Grandma.

Save a life—use correct  
punctuation.

## Commas

The most frequently used, and misused, punctuation mark is the comma. Use a comma to join two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, for, or, nor, yet, so*). The comma is always placed *before* the conjunction.

A comma is used to separate a dependent clause from the independent clause.

Example 1:

1. I arrested the defendant, and I booked him into the jail.

Two independent clauses:

1. I arrested the defendant.
2. I booked him into the jail.

A comma is required before the coordinating conjunction.

2. I arrested the defendant and booked him into the jail.

One independent clause: I arrested the defendant.

One dependent clause: booked him into the jail. (no subject)

A comma is not used.

More Examples:

1. I interviewed the victim, and she gave a sworn statement.
2. I interviewed the victim, but she refused to give a sworn statement.

A comma is used to separate items in a list. Place a comma before the *and* at the end of the series.

Examples:

1. Deputies Smith, Jones, and White responded to the call. (correct)
2. Deputies Smith, Jones and White responded to the call. (incorrect)

Commas are also used after conjunctive adverbs (however, therefore, and so on). However, if the phrase is very short—less than three words—the comma may be omitted.

Examples:

1. When I responded to the call, I activated my emergency lights and siren.
2. Responding to the call, I activated my emergency lights and siren.
3. Therefore, the findings of my investigation are that no crime took place.

A comma is used to isolate an appositive (a phrase that renames the noun).

## Exercise 1.2

Place or remove commas for correct punctuation.

1. We approached the defendant and Deputy Smith asked to buy a “dime.”
2. We approached the defendant, and asked to buy a “dime.”
3. At today’s Day-Shift briefing Sergeant Jones asked for volunteers.
4. I charged the defendant with sale and delivery of cocaine, possession of cocaine and possession of drug paraphernalia.
5. Sergeant Jones the Day-Shift supervisor, asked for volunteers.
6. I arrested the defendant for shoplifting yet he denied the charge.
7. I am usually assigned to Zone 43 but today I am working in Zone 45.
8. Today I wrote reports for burglary, theft and battery.
9. Deputy Smith, an experienced agent made a cocaine seizure today.

See answers on p. 23.

Examples:

1. The man, a white male, was arrested for theft.
2. Deputy Smith, a rookie, was assigned to the midnight shift.
3. My assigned vehicle, car 1042, is a 1991 Ford LTD.

Check if the commas have been placed properly by simply removing the words between the commas. If what remains is a complete sentence, the commas are correctly placed.

Example:

The man, a white male, was arrested for theft.

Remove the words between the commas: a white male.

What remains, “The man was arrested for theft,” is a complete sentence.

The placement of the commas is correct.

## The Semicolon

The semicolon indicates a strong relationship between two sentences.

Examples:

1. I interviewed the victim; however, she failed to provide a statement.
2. I arrested the defendant; later, I transported and booked him into the jail.

### Exercise 1.3

Insert or remove semicolons for correct punctuation.

1. We responded to the call, Deputy Smith wrote the report.
2. At briefing the sergeant asked for; volunteers and reports.
3. I saw the rescue team treating the victim. She had a stomach wound.
4. The defendant removed the item from the shelf, she then left the store after failing to pay.
5. I am assigned to Sector 4, and I primarily work Zone 43.

See answers on p. 23.

## The Colon

The colon is used to introduce a list.

Examples:

1. The defendant was charged with the following: burglary, grand theft, and criminal mischief.  
(Notice the placement of the commas in the series.)
2. Three Deputies responded to the call: Smith, Jones, and Harris.

## Exercise 1.4

Insert colons appropriately.

1. I charged the defendant with the following, assault, battery, and theft.
2. The following attachments are provided with this report, sworn statements, tow sheet, and evidence form.
3. I testified on several cases today while in court 92-123456, 90-123456, and 89-123456.

See answers on p. 23.

### Quotation Marks

Quotation marks are used to indicate another person's spoken or written words. They are useful in criminal justice documents to indicate statements made by suspects or defendants, responses or comments by victims or witnesses that are particularly relevant to an investigation or anytime an important statement is made. Students also regularly use quotation marks in their academic papers. It is important to remember to only quote from a source when the information cannot be paraphrased in another way, it involves statistics that must be stated exactly, or the point is so important that a student believes it must be stated exactly as the original author wrote. Students should always use quoted material sparingly and attempt to paraphrase or summarize the work as much as possible.

If the quotation is placed at the end of the sentence, a comma is placed before the opening quotation mark. A period is placed within the end quotation mark at the end of the sentence after the in-text citation.

Examples:

1. The defendant stated, "I didn't mean to kill her."
2. I told the defendant, "You're under arrest."

If a sentence begins with a quotation, a comma is placed within the end quotation mark.

3. "I didn't mean to kill her," he said.

If a quotation mark is around a single word or group of words, the punctuation *always* goes inside the quotation mark.

Examples:

1. I asked the suspect if he knew where I could purchase a "dime," the common street reference for \$10 of cocaine.
2. The victim told me he had taken LSD and was "high," so I called Rescue for medical treatment.

## Exercise 1.5

Punctuate the following sentences properly using quotation marks and commas as needed.

1. The victim said He stabbed me in the stomach.
2. He stabbed me in the stomach she said.
3. I bought three hits of LSD today.
4. Today I bought three hits of LSD two cocaine rocks and a gram of pot.
5. I asked the defendant for a dime and he took me to 1234 18th Street in Zone 42.
6. She said He stabbed me in the stomach; but I saw no wound.
7. The deputy asked, Who called the Police?
8. Who was it who said Live and let live?

See answers on p. 23.

### Plurals

Many nouns are changed to the plural form simply by adding an -s or -es to the end of the noun: Officer becomes officers; bus becomes buses. Some nouns, however, form plurals irregularly by changing the spelling of the word. Some of the most common include

*man men   woman women   me us I we*

Some nouns do not change their spelling at all to form plurals: *deer, sheep, fish, police*.

Some nouns that have a Latin root still use the Latin form of the plural rather than the English -s. Some examples include *datum/data, crisis/crises, and memorandum/memoranda*.

### Possessives

The possessive form demonstrates a relationship between two nouns.

Examples:

1. The victim's car was burglarized.
2. The defendant's rights were revoked.
3. The vehicle's tires were slashed.

If the noun is plural and ends with an s, add only an apostrophe.

Examples:

1. The victims' cars were burglarized.
2. The defendants' rights were revoked.
3. These are the victims' radios.
4. Here are the officers' guns.
5. The vehicles' tires were slashed.

## Capitalization

Capitalize the names of directions when they indicate a specific location, but not when they indicate a general direction.

Examples:

1. South Carolina
2. The defendant fled south on foot.

Capitalize titles only when they precede the person's name.

Examples:

1. Colonel Smith
2. I met with the colonel.

## Commonly Misused Words

Homophones are words that look and sound alike but have different meanings. The following are examples of homophones:

*Its* and *it's*

1. *Its* shows possession. "You can't judge a book by its cover."
2. *It's* is the contraction of *it is*.

*There*, *their*, and *they're*

1. *There* indicates a location. An easy way to remember this is to look for the word "here" within "there." *There* also functions as an adverb, as in "There are no more calls holding."
2. *Their* is an adjective. It describes a noun by showing that an object belongs to more than one person or thing: "Their car was burglarized," or "Here is their stolen property," or "The dogs were in their pen."
3. *They're* is the contraction of *they are*.

*Lie, lay, lain;* to recline

1. I will now lie down.
2. Yesterday I lay down.
3. Last week, I had also lain down.

*Lay, laid, laid;* to place or set down

1. I will now lay my book down.
2. He laid the gun on the ground.
3. He had already laid his gun down.

## Exercise 1.6

Insert the correct word.

1. A police patrol car is easily identified by (it's/its) \_\_\_\_\_ distinctive color scheme.
2. When is shift change? (It's/Its) \_\_\_\_\_ this weekend.
3. Yes, (there/their/they're) \_\_\_\_\_ are no bananas.
4. We are going over (there/their/they're) \_\_\_\_\_.
5. We found (there/their/they're) \_\_\_\_\_ stolen property.
6. (There/Their/They're) \_\_\_\_\_ going over (there/their/they're) \_\_\_\_\_.
7. I will (lie/lay/lain) \_\_\_\_\_ down now.
8. The suspect (lay/laid) \_\_\_\_\_ the gun on the ground, and the officer ordered him to (lie, lay, lain) \_\_\_\_\_ face down.
9. (Who/Whom) \_\_\_\_\_ responded to the call?
10. Deputy Smith, (who/whom) \_\_\_\_\_ did you interview at the scene?
11. The people (which/who/that) \_\_\_\_\_ were arrested during the reverse sting operation were all adults.

See answers on p. 24.

*Who and whom*

Who is used as a subject; whom is used as an object.

1. Who wrote the report?
2. The Lieutenant asked the Sergeant, "Whom did you have write this report?"

In modern, spoken English, whom is rarely used.

### *Which, who, and that*

Use which and that to refer to animals and things. Always use who to refer to people.

1. The horses, which were kept at the stable, jumped the fence to get loose.
2. The Deputies who responded to the call took 2 minutes to arrive.

### **The Modifier**

A modifier is a word or group of words that describes a noun or a verb. Modifiers may appear before or after the word they describe, but the modifier must be logically placed to prevent confusion.

Examples:

1. Correctional Officer Smith's decision to transfer was an *important* career move.
2. The crime scene perimeter was planned *carefully* by the sergeant.

Notice that the modifiers in both sentences can be dropped without changing the meaning of the sentence.

1. Correctional Officer Smith's decision to transfer was a career move.
2. The crime scene perimeter was planned by the sergeant.

Modifiers can easily confuse readers when they are misplaced within a sentence.

Examples:

1. Suffering from a heart attack, Deputy Smith found the victim at her door. (Who had the heart attack?)

Revised

1. Deputy Smith found the victim at her door suffering from a heart attack.

Examples:

Misplaced 1: The female Deputy, while searching the female informant, found the drugs that were sold by Deputy Smith in the woman's pants.

Revised 1: The female Deputy, while searching the female informant, found the drugs in the woman's pants. The drugs were sold by Deputy Smith in the reverse sting operation.

Misplaced 2: Deputy Jones, while on routine patrol, saw the drunk driver who was arrested by Deputy Harris driving south on Kirkman Road.

Revised 2: Deputy Jones, while on routine patrol, saw the drunk driver driving south on Kirkman Road. Deputy Harris arrested the drunk driver.

## Spelling

Proper spelling is a vital part of every written document. Just as improper grammar and punctuation is a sign of semi-literacy, so too is improper spelling. A misspelled word screams for the reader's attention and shapes a negative image of the writer. Several misspelled words can have such a negative effect upon the reader that many will simply refuse to continue reading, finding it too difficult to understand the narrative.

Those who write by hand should keep a good dictionary nearby. When writing by computer, do not overly rely on the spell check. While a spell check will identify and correct misspelled words, it will fail to correct homophones. In this sentence, *four* example, the word "for" is misspelled as "four," yet a spell check program would fail to identify the error.

The following is a list of some of the most frequently misspelled words used in criminal justice writing.

accept	attack	disturbance	misdemeanor
accurate	attorney	efficient	paraphernalia
accuse	battery	examination	receive
acquaintance	bruise	fellatio	sergeant
advisable	bureau	felony	sheriff
aggravated	burglary	foreign	subpoena
apparent	canvassed	harass	tattoo
appeal	cemetery	height	trafficking
apprehend	commit	homicide	trespass
apprehension	conceal	interrogate	trying
approximate	confidential	intoxication	unnecessary
argument	conveyance	jewelry	vicinity
armed robbery	counsel	judge	victim
arraignment	criminal	juvenile	warrant
assault	cunnilingus	lieutenant	weight
associate	discipline	marijuana	wounded

## Critical Thinking Skills, Academic Writing, and Professional Writing

Being able to identify errors in writing and to write thorough reports and interesting academic papers requires the ability to critically think. A critical

thinker will write better because he or she will weed out nonessential information from written documents. Rugerrio (2008) defines critical thinking as “the process by which we test claims and arguments and determine which have merit and which do not” (p. 18). Ennis (2011) adds, “Critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do” (p. 1). Critical thinking is a foundational goal of the college experience because it is at the core of modern personal, social, and professional life (Paul, 1995). Phillips and Burrell (2009) note critical thinkers overcome biases and false assumptions that impede decision making. As such, critical thinking prepares students for all aspects of life.

Academic writing enhances critical thinking in several key ways. It is a process that requires students to verify the credibility and biases of source material and objectively examine not just their thoughts and beliefs, but also the ideas of those diametrically opposed to their own (Paul, 1995).

Critical thinking is also an essential skill in the criminal justice professions since it is a key piece of problem solving. Common writing assignments in criminal justice classes include a reflective journal, essay paper, research essay, monograph, annotated bibliography, case study, and legal analysis.

## **Reflective Journal**

The reflective journal assignment is designed to capture a student’s feelings and responses to an issue. Journals are more than a synopsis or a simple “I think” response to a question. This assignment requires students to thoroughly and critically evaluate a reading assignment by applying current theory, practice, and course materials to assess a problem, issue, or policy.

## **Essay Paper**

A common assignment for students is the essay paper. The narrative and descriptive essay are examples that require no outside research. For these essays, students are asked to tell a story, explain a process, or describe a place or thing. The length of this essay is typically five pages or less, but length can vary according to the course and instructor.

## **Research Paper**

Like the essay paper, the research paper is a commonly assigned project, especially in upper-level courses. Here, students must conduct outside research to identify source materials that either support or refute a thesis. The student must critically analyze sources to ensure the information is from a respected and reliable source and is both current and credible. Although many students feel anxious about writing a research paper, it can be a valuable experience since “many students will continue to do research throughout their career” (Purdue OWL, 2018a).

## Monograph

A monograph is an in-depth study of a single subject written by faculty or scholars for an academic audience (Eastern Illinois University, 2016). According to Crossick (2016), the monograph allows for the “full examination of a topic . . . woven together in a reflective narrative that is not possible in a journal article” (p. 15).

## Annotated Bibliography

While a bibliography is a list of sources used to research a particular topic or phenomenon, an annotated bibliography provides a summary and evaluation of each source (Purdue OWL, 2018e). The annotated bibliography will include a formatted reference, such as those found in a bibliography, followed by an annotation. Annotations are written in paragraph form and include a summary of the main points of the article, an assessment of how the article relates to the topic, phenomenon, or research question, and a reflection of what may be missing from the article and/or if the source is reliable, biased, and what the goal of the article may be (Purdue OWL, 2018a).

## Case Study

A case study is an in-depth analysis of real life events intended to examine individuals, groups, or events in their natural environment (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). To successfully complete the assignment in criminal justice courses, students are often required to (1) summarize an actual event and identify a problem; (2) provide a detailed explanation of how the problem was addressed or resolved; and (3) critically analyze the resolution by applying course materials, criminal justice theory, and the findings and conclusions of research from previous study of the same or similar problem.

## Legal Analysis

The legal analysis assignment is a research paper in which a student must analyze a set of facts within the context of applicable law. Professors often assign a case study as part of a Constitutional Law, State Law, or Civil Law course. Students are required to research judicial opinions, state statutes and constitutions, the United States Constitution, and administrative law (Rowe, 2009). It is particularly important for students to ensure the applied law is not outdated or appealed (Rowe, 2009).

## Writing for the Criminal Justice Professions

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Thinking critically and writing for academic classes is great practice for the profession of criminal justice. Similarly, the criminal justice professions require a variety of written work. Harvey (2015) notes the most powerful instrument a criminal justice officer carries is a pen. These are strong words considering the

many weapons carried by criminal justice practitioners. If a report is poorly written, readers are less likely to take the content seriously and may question the writer's credibility, which, in the criminal justice system, can have serious consequences (Harrison, Weisman, & Zornado, 2017). The following is a short listing of the legal consequences of poorly written reports:

1. Drug case dismissed and inmates released due to bad search warrant (Astolfi, 2016).
2. Killers go free due to incomplete police reports (Haner, Wilson, & O'Donnell, 2002).
3. Police Credibility on Trial in D.C.

Courts drawing the jury's attention to such a discrepancy—by having an officer read aloud from his arrest report—gives a defense lawyer an opening to explore whether the officer might have been wrong about other important facts (Flaherty & Harriston, 1994).

4. Words Used in Sexual Assault Reports Can Hurt Cases

Poorly written reports—sometimes laden with implications of disbelief or skepticism—can contaminate a jury's perception of a victim's credibility or cripple a case altogether (Dissell, 2010).

5. Officers Indicted by Federal Grand Jury

Three Georgia officers charged with writing false reports to cover up police assault (Department of Justice, 2014).

## Policing Reports

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Police officers are required to write a narrative in many different types of documents. Many agencies use a cover page of check boxes and blank spaces to indicate the type of incident being documented, demographic information, and the address of the parties involved. Many of these same documents, though, require the officer to complete a detailed, written narrative that accurately documents the officer's observations and actions, statements made by victims, witnesses, and suspects, any evidence collected, and other information relevant to the case. Policing documents are often written in a narrative format in which the officer tells a story of his or her involvement in an official event.

The following list represents the most often used documents that require a written narrative.

### Field Notes

Field notes are commonly used in policing. Notes taken at a crime scene are vital to the accuracy of initial and follow-up reports. Officers are also able to refer to their field notes to refresh their memory during deposition and trial in most states. Note taking is the process of gathering

and recording facts and information relevant to the police investigation. 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.

## **Incident Reports**

The incident report is the most common type of writing assignment in policing. It is usually written by a patrol officer to officially document a crime reported by a citizen or when the officer makes an arrest. The document serves several purposes. It is a legal document of an officer's actions, observations, and conversations at a crime scene or self-initiated contact with a citizen. Typical reports can range from one to three pages in length, but more serious crimes are often five or more pages. Incident reports are used by investigators, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, and the media to evaluate an officer's job performance.

## **Supplemental Report**

This report is an addendum to the incident report. The supplemental report is often used by officers and investigators to add additional information to the incident report. The supplemental report is most often used to document interviews, evidence collected, or other activity related to a case that occurred after an officer's original incident report.

## **Booking Reports**

In addition to an incident report, officers are often required to write a booking report when an arrestee is transported or delivered to a jail. The narrative of a booking report is often just two or three paragraphs since it requires only the details that establish probable cause for the arrest.

## **Evidence**

The evidence report is used to document any item that has been seized by an officer or has evidentiary value. It also establishes a chain of custody so that seized items can be presented in court. Advances in the technology available to criminal justice agencies have expanded the scope of items of evidentiary value to include video and audio recorded on cell phones, body and in-car cameras, housing unit cameras located in adult and juvenile detention facilities, courtroom cameras, and surveillance cameras. This report is also an addendum to the incident report.

## **Search Warrant**

The Fourth Amendment protects against unreasonable searches and seizures, and in general, a search warrant is needed prior to conducting a search.

The search warrant is a written order, signed by a magistrate having jurisdiction over the place to be searched, based upon probable cause, ordering a police officer to search a particular person or place and to seize certain described property. The search warrant must sufficiently describe the place to be searched and the items to be seized very clearly so that any officer executing the warrant would make no mistake locating the property or seizing the proper items.

## Grants

Many local criminal justice agencies struggle to continue to offer a level of service enjoyed in the past as revenues shrink and budgets are dramatically reduced. There will always be crime, but criminal justice professionals and professors alike are often forced to find new funding sources to create or test new ideas and programs (Davis, 1999).

Perhaps not often enough, these agencies seek out grant funding to supplement personnel and equipment costs, finance community service programs, and fund new initiatives that otherwise would not be possible. According to Karsh and Fox (2014), a grant “is an award of money that allows you to do very specific things that usually meet very specific guidelines that are spelled out in painstaking detail and to which you must respond very clearly in your grant proposal” (p. 12). The field of criminal justice—academically and professionally—has benefited greatly from grant funding (Davis, 1999).

Grant funds can come from a number of sources including the federal government, corporations, foundations, and even individuals. The federal government, through Grants.gov, is the most prominent grant provider for criminal justice agencies. The United States Department of Justice (DOJ) offers grant funding to local and state law enforcement agencies to “assist victims of crime; to provide training and technical assistance; to conduct research; and to implement programs that improve the criminal, civil, and juvenile justice systems” (DOJ, 2018). Through the Office of Community Oriented Policing, the Office of Justice Systems, and the Office of Violence Against Women, the DOJ provides grants to support the hiring and training of police officers, implementation of crime control programs, and reduction of violence against women (DOJ, 2018). Similarly, the Bureau of Justice Assistance provides grant funding for “law enforcement, prosecution, indigent defense, courts, crime prevention and education, corrections and community corrections, [and] drug treatment” (Office of Justice Programs, 2018). Criminal justice agencies can also establish partnerships with academic institutions. According to Gerardi and Wolff (2008), one such collaborative effort yielded over \$6 million to a corrections institution over a 5-year period.

## Corrections Reports

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Most documents used in corrections do not require a written narrative. Many documents can be effectively completed by selecting a check box

or entering demographic or descriptive information in a content box. Like in policing, though, corrections officers often find the need to write an incident report.

## **Incident Report**

Although often written in third person, the incident report narrative written by a corrections officer is very similar to that written by a police officer. This report can be used to officially document most events, including criminal activity, violation of institutional policy, discovered contraband, and incidents between officers and inmates, as well as those between inmates. They may also be used to justify inmate discipline, segregation, or use of force by an officer.

## **Probation/Parole Reports**

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### **Pre-trial Report**

A pre-trial report is completed prior to an individual's first appearance in court and recommends whether to release or detain the person before trial (United States Courts, n.d.). This report addresses the defendant's probability of following the law and the court's directives, and it recommends conditions for the court to impose if the defendant is released, such as drug testing or location monitoring (United States Courts, 2018).

### **Pre-sentence Investigation Report**

A pre-sentence investigation and report are completed when a defendant is found guilty at trial or pleads guilty. This report requires an officer to assess an offender's "living conditions, family relationships, community ties, and drug use," among other things (United States Courts, 2018). According to the American Probation and Parole Association (1987), the purpose of the pre-sentence investigation report is to "provide the sentencing court with succinct and precise information upon which to base a rational sentencing decision" (para. 1).

## **Court Reports**

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### **Restraining or Protective Order**

A Restraining Order is issued by a court to protect a business or individual from harm. In the case of a business, the order often requires a person not enter buildings and parking lots and to not engage in contact with business employees or customers. Individual orders are most often in the form

of a Domestic Violence Injunction. The Domestic Violence Injunction orders an alleged abuser to remain a certain distance away from someone and have no contact with that person.

## Victim Impact Statement

The victim impact statement is information from crime victims, in their own words, about how a crime has affected them (National Center for Victims of Crime, 2012). Cassell (2008) notes victims “have this right in all federal sentencings and in virtually all state sentencings” (p. 611). The report offers victims an opportunity to participate in the justice process by describing the physical, psychological, financial, and social harm they have suffered as a result of the crime. It is often provided to the court prior to sentencing an offender and allows a judge to consider information that might otherwise not be available. The victim impact statement is written by a crime victim, but a victim advocate will often assist the victim in writing the document.

Consider the following Victim Impact Statement (Cassell, P. G. [2008]. *In defense of victim impact statements*. Ohio St. J. Crim. L., 6, 618.):

My name is Susan Antrobus[.] I am the mother of Vanessa Quinn, who was murdered at Trolley Square Mall February 12, 2007. I am writing this letter to you in hopes that you can understand why I feel the need to give an impact statement on behalf of my daughter Vanessa. . . . How has this affected my family[?] [T]o be honest I don't know yet, I can only tell you how it has affected us to this point in time. My Mom gave up her fight for life, 6 weeks after Vanessa was taken from us, and my youngest daughter Susanna had a miscarriage the same night my Mom passed away. My husband and I cry every day, we struggle to get through each and every day, you wake up with it, you carry it through your day and it goes to bed with you every night. All you can do is hope tomorrow will be a little easier [than] today. February 12 has never ended for us; it feels like one long continuous day that will never end. . . . If you're old enough at 18 to give your life up for this country, you're old enough to know what you're doing when you sell an illegal weapon to a minor. I am asking and pleading with this court to give Mr. Hunter the maximum sentence to send a message to the people of this country and people like Mr. Hunter, that if you chose to engage in illegal weapons to minors you will be held responsible for your actions, and maybe some people would get it. . . . It cost us 7,000 dollars to lay our daughter Vanessa to rest. . . . I think I deserve to give an impact statement, since Vanessa is not here to speak for herself, I don't think 10 minutes is asking for much considering what we've lost for a life time. . . .

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

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Writing well is an important skill for criminal justice students and professionals. Academic writing assignments improve the student's research, critical thinking, and writing skills in preparation for future criminal justice careers. Poor writing can discredit a student, officer, and/or a criminal justice agency's credibility and reputation.

Common writing assignments for criminal justice students include essays, case studies, annotated bibliographies, and legal analysis. In addition to gaining a deeper understanding of criminal justice topics and current issues,

assignments such as these enhance critical thinking skills, an essential skill in the criminal justice professions since it is a key piece of problem solving.

Criminal justice professionals are required to write a variety of report narratives, such as an incident report, search warrant, grant, or pre-trial report. As Harrison and colleagues (2017) aptly note, a poorly written report may bring into question the writer's credibility, which, in the criminal justice system, can have serious consequences.

## ADDITIONAL READING

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Strunk, W. (2011). *The elements of style*. Project Gutenberg. Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/37134/37134-h/37134-h.htm>

Purdue Online Writing Lab. (2018). General writing resources. Retrieved from <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/>

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

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1. Why is writing well important in criminal justice professions?
2. What functions does the basic incident report serve?
3. Who might read an incident report inside the criminal justice agency? Outside the agency?
4. Define critical thinking. How is critical thinking important to criminal justice students and practitioners?
5. List three documents commonly used in criminal justice agencies. Describe how these documents are used and why they are important.

## EXERCISE ANSWERS

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### Exercise 1.1 Answers

1. defendant (subject) entered (verb).
2. defendant (subject) smashed (verb).
3. He (subject) removed (verb).
4. stereo (subject) is valued (verb).
5. I (subject) processed (verb).
6. defendant (subject) punched (verb).

7. suspect (subject) removed (verb).
8. I (subject) responded (verb).

9. I (subject) arrested (verb).
10. I (subject) transported (verb).

### Exercise 1.2 Answers

1. We approached the defendant, and Deputy Smith asked to buy a “dime.”
2. We approached the defendant and asked to buy a “dime.”
3. At today’s Day-Shift briefing, Sgt. Jones asked for volunteers.
4. I charged the defendant with sale and delivery of cocaine, possession of cocaine, and possession of drug paraphernalia.
5. Sgt. Jones, the Day-Shift supervisor, asked for volunteers.
6. I arrested the defendant for shoplifting, yet he denied the charge.
7. I am usually assigned to Zone 43, but today I am working in Zone 45.
8. Today I wrote reports for burglary, theft, and battery.
9. Deputy Smith, an experienced drug agent, made a cocaine seizure today.

### Exercise 1.3 Answers

1. We responded to the call; Deputy Smith wrote the report.
2. At briefing the sergeant asked for volunteers and reports.
3. I saw Rescue treating the victim; she had a stomach wound.
4. The defendant removed the item from the shelf; she then left the store after failing to pay.
5. I am assigned to Sector 4; I primarily work Zone 43.

### Exercise 1.4 Answers

1. I charged the defendant with the following: assault, battery, and theft.
2. The following attachments are provided with this report: sworn statements, tow sheet, and evidence form.
3. I testified on several cases today while in court: 92-123456, 90-123456, and 89-123456.

### Exercise 1.5 Answers

1. The victim said, “He stabbed me in the stomach.”
2. “He stabbed me in the stomach,” she said.
3. “I bought three hits of LSD today.”
4. “Today I bought three hits of LSD, two cocaine rocks, and a gram of pot.”
5. “I asked the defendant for a dime, and he took me to 1234 18th Street in Zone 42.”
6. She said, “He stabbed me in the stomach”; but I saw no wound.
7. The deputy asked, “Who called the police?”
8. Who was it who said “Live and let live”?

### Exercise 1.6 Answers

1. its
2. it's
3. there
4. there
5. their
6. they're, there
7. lie
8. laid, lie
9. who
10. whom
11. who

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