

Correctional Report Writing

Oklahoma Department of Corrections

2016

Course Information

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 - Annual Review: Deanna Haskins, EDU; Date: Feb 18 2016
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OP-050109 Reporting of Incidents; Effective Date: 04/29/14
Jean Reynolds, PHD; Criminal justice Report Writing, Feb. 29, 2012
Free Dictionary.com
Encarta Dictionary
National Institute of Corrections; Behavior Observation, Recording, and Report Writing;
Anne M. Nelsen, MSW, MPA
- Copyright Clearance: N/A

Course Objectives

Upon completion of this course, participants will be able to:

- Identify the most common types of reports used in the correctional workplace.
- Choose the seven basic elements of a report.
- Clarify the six requirements for writing effective correctional reports.
- Describe information that should be documented in hand written notes.
- Describe the legal issues of report writing.
- Write a clear, complete and concise report.

Introduction

The old adage, “If it isn’t documented, it didn’t happen,” is not necessarily true. We do not write down everything that happens in our lives, day-to-day, hour-by-hour. A great deal happens to us that we do not document. Comprehensive recording and report writing, based on vigilant observation of behavior and events, is essential to verify that something did occur and to record the details of the event.

Corrections is a profession that relies on written communication. Accurate and complete written reports form the documentation that helps to complete our agency mission. When documentation is not complete, the result may be lost time, confusion, and costly personnel and legal proceedings.

Written communication usually requires more thought and effort than any other forms of communication.

There are two necessary skills for any correctional staff member, the ability to **observe** behavior and events accurately and the ability to **record** them in a clear and concise fashion. Entering the field of corrections, most employees are not familiar with a fact based style of writing. It is a different format than most formal writing styles. Employees must develop this skill through training and experience.



A well written report documents your words and actions, provides data for statistical reports, facilitates investigations, and showcases your professionalism.

Definitions

Correctional report:

A factual account or statement describing in detail an event or situation, in chronological order, usually as the result of observation or inquiry.

Facts: *“Something that can be shown to be true, to exist, or to have happened.” Putting irrelevant or biased information in a report is another common report writing error. **Your report must be factual.** Usually we verify that statements are facts through our senses: seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling. We can also verify facts through other sources.*

Opinions: *“The view somebody takes about a certain issue, especially when it is based solely on personal judgment,” or “An expert assessment of something.”*

Hearsay: *The word “hearsay,” as defined by Encarta Dictionary, is “second hand information; information that is heard from other people.” Because you cannot testify to something you did not see or hear directly, hearsay information is generally inadmissible in a courtroom. However, hearsay may be important information when conducting an investigation; for example, an inmate tells you what another inmate said. When entering information that you did not directly witness into a report, always include where or from whom you received the information*

Types of Reports

The most common correctional reports:

Disciplinary

Serious
Incident

Incident

Inspection

Medical

ACA

Log entries and written records are also considered forms of correctional reports:

Visiting



Telephone

Mail



Canteen records

Property records

Seven Common Elements of Effective Reports

These questions should be asked and answered as you complete your reports.

Who?

What?

When?

Where?

How?

Why?

Action
taken

WHO

- was involved?
- discovered the incident?
- witnessed the incident?
- responded?
- took what actions?
- was in possession of what?
- was notified?

Clearly state who did what (in other words, use active voice). Passive-voice sentences often do not tell WHO did the action. "Inmate Harris was handcuffed." This sentence, in passive voice, can create confusion if several officers are working the incident. In court, six months later, are you going to remember who did what?

WHAT

- happened?
- behaviors did the inmate exhibit?
- was the inmate's complaint?
- property was involved?
- actions did the inmate take?
- were the results of those actions?
- automatic systems were involved (alarms, gates, locks, automatic sprinklers)?
- contraband/evidence was found and collected?
- equipment was used?
- equipment or furnishings were damaged?
- follow-up is required?

WHEN

- did the incident happen?
- was the incident discovered and reported?
- did various staff members arrive?
- did back-up help arrive?
- was the incident brought under control?

All time elements connected with the event(s) need to be identified in the report. If the exact time is unknown, specify the approximate time. Example: "On the above date and approximate time I saw..."

Events need to be reported chronologically (in the order of occurrence) with no unexplained gaps in time.

WHERE

- did the incident occur?
- were you when the incident occurred?
- were the inmates and other staff members involved in the incident?
- was the evidence/contraband found?

In your report, you may include diagrams indicating the location of persons or items pertaining to the event. It may be important to include distances from fixed points in your diagram.

HOW

- Method of Operation
- Used to describe a inmate's characteristic way of committing an offense (especially for repeat incidents).

WHY

- Remember to stick to the facts. Do not add your feelings, opinions or speculation to the report.
- Was there a motive? If this information is second hand, state so and furnish the source of the information.
- Do not exaggerate or embellish the facts and circumstances of the incident. “Just the facts.”

“Why” is probably the most difficult of all questions to answer in a report. Generally, you can only speculate as to the reasons something occurred or to the motive of individuals involved; unless someone gives you this information. If the information is second hand be sure to state that in the report.

ACTION TAKEN

- What was the final disposition of the incident?
- If the problem was referred to someone else, to whom?
- If the incident was handled informally, how was it handled?
- Specify if any other related reports were completed.
- Report the disposition of the evidence/contraband.
- Explain how injuries were handled.

Report Writing Tips



- Be factual.
- Do not assume or imply anything about the incident in your report.
- Do not use texting abbreviations, or acronyms unless they are explained in the report.
- Organize your thoughts and notes before beginning the report. An outline may be helpful.
- Avoid vague terms such as:

- “It was discovered”
- “It was determined”
- “I received information that...”
- “Involved in or participated in”
- “It appeared”

- “Common area”

WHAT was discovered?

HOW was the determination made?

HOW was the information gathered and from who?

HOW were they involved & WHAT did they do?

WHAT does that mean? It was or was not. You are the expert.

WHERE in the common area?

Style Guidelines

1. Choose familiar words.
2. Choose strong verbs.
3. Write short sentences.
4. Omit empty fillers and eliminate redundancy.
5. Use active voice.

Long, Unfamiliar Words

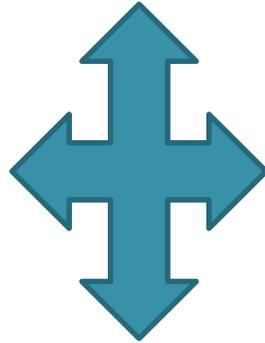
- Duplicate
- Elevation
- Equivalent
- Fabricate
- Furnish
- Indeterminate
- Indicate
- Ineffectual

Short, Familiar Words

- Copy
- Height
- Equal
- Build
- Give
- Vague
- Show
- Useless

Active verbs speak
powerfully.

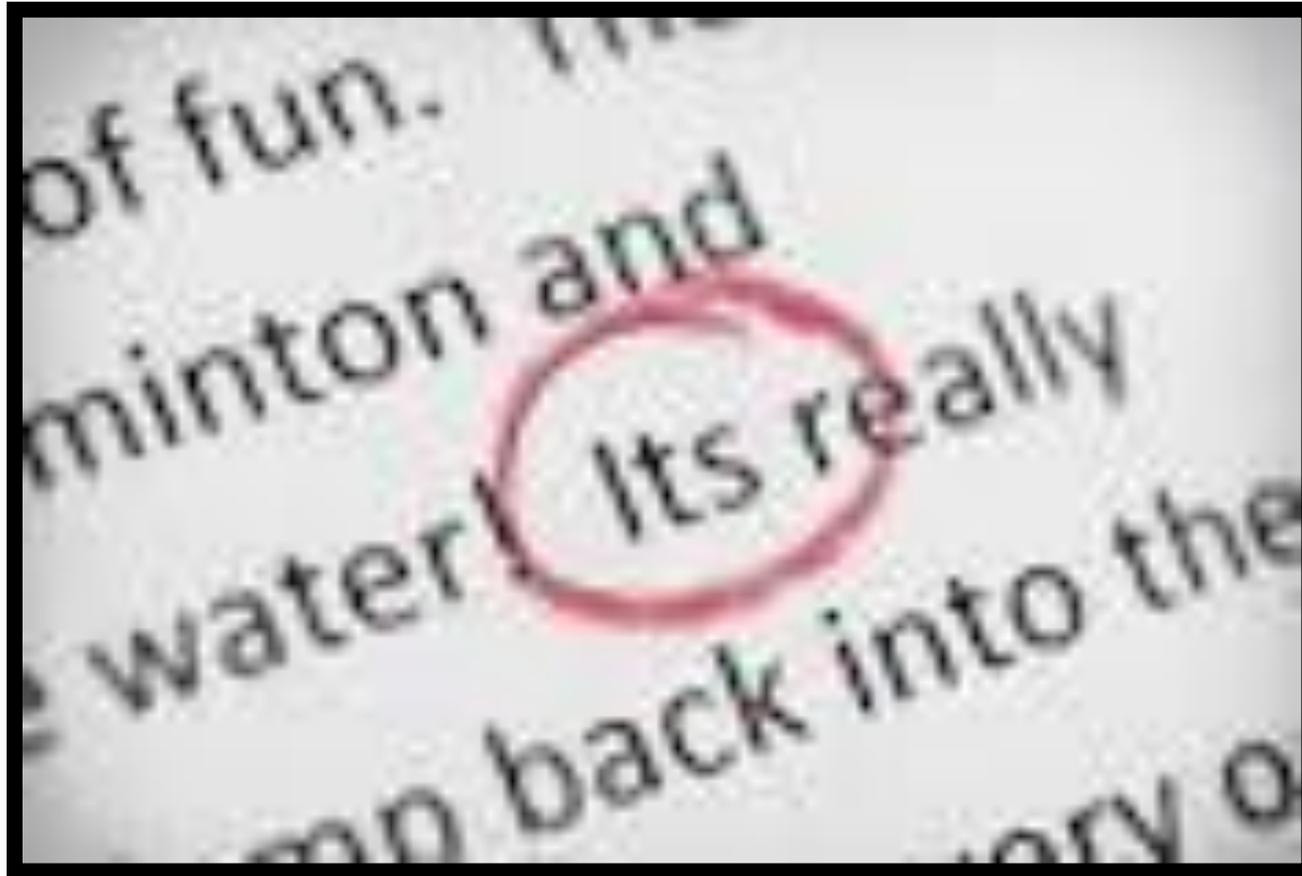
An active voice adds
impact to your writing.



~~Actual~~ facts – Redundant
phrase. You don't need
actual. Ex: Listen to the
actual facts of the case.
Better: Listen to the facts
of the case.

Use short, to-the-point,
fact-oriented sentences
that do not leave room for
interpretation.

SIX REQUIREMENTS FOR GOOD REPORTS



Do not editorialize – just state the facts. Be brief and to the point.

Make every sentence count.

Concise

Avoid repeating a point already made.

Do not include unnecessary information that is not pertinent to the specific incident.

Avoid poor grammar by using simple descriptive language.

Write neatly and legibly.

Give accurate information, pay attention to detail.

Record actual words or phrases spoken, and do not paraphrase or generalize.

Clear

Check for correct spelling using a dictionary or spell check on the computer.

Make a list of words that give you trouble and write them neatly on a piece of paper that you can keep handy while you are working on a report.

Use simple, descriptive words.
Avoid exaggerated prose.

Use names of people, numbers, titles,
note time and date, gender, and words
that point to a specific person or thing.

Correct

Organize the facts in a clear and logical
sequence so that the report is easily
understood by anyone.

Avoid slang, jargon, and insensitive
language unless you are quoting
someone's exact words. Sexist language,
vulgarity, and other unprofessional
terminology can embarrass you.

Avoid judgments, stereotypes, opinions and biases.

Avoid judgments explanations, and theories.

State only what you saw, heard or did.

Avoid absolute statements. For instance, “Inmate Jones is always late for count” is an absolute statement. Unless the inmate is late for every count, a more accurate statement would be “Inmate Jones is frequently late for count.”

Objective

Your report documents your fairness and honesty.

If necessary, jot down your notes, then allow a cooling-off period before writing your report.

Objectivity is a character trait that comes from your commitment to excellence and professionalism.

Avoid generalizations and hunches, which can open you up to challenges in a courtroom later. Statements like “I knew Inmate Harris was lying” and “Inmate Johnson seemed nervous” do not belong in a professional report. Stick to factual descriptions: “Inmate Johnson’s hands were shaking, and he looked over his shoulder 10 times in less than five minutes.”

Have you proofread the report for accuracy and readability?

Are the questions of who, what, when, where, why, how and action taken answered as it relates to the incident?

Complete

Have you included all essential information?

Did you use an active voice when writing the report?

Did you sign and date the report?

Is the time and date submitted to shift supervisor or department head on the report?

The report should be neatly written and free of physical flaws, organized, error free and in a format easily read.

Use Standard English except when quoting someone's exact words.

Professional

Reports are another form of communication. It is important to maintain professionalism in both manner and speech.

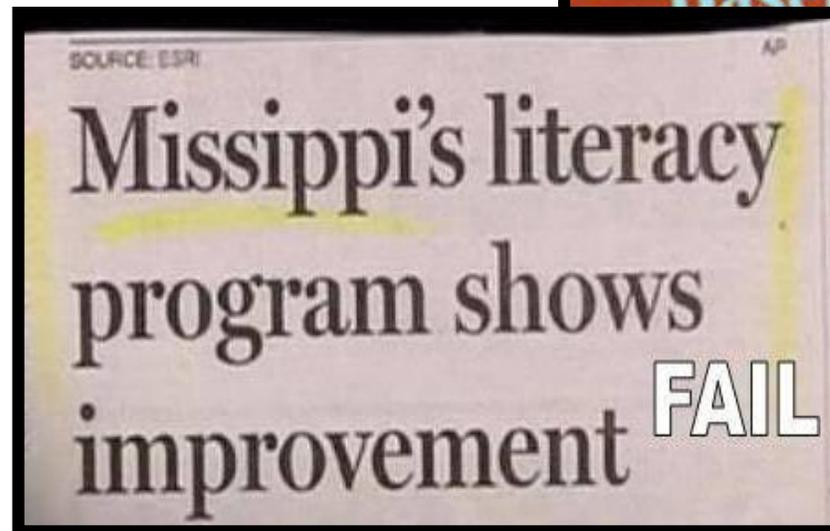
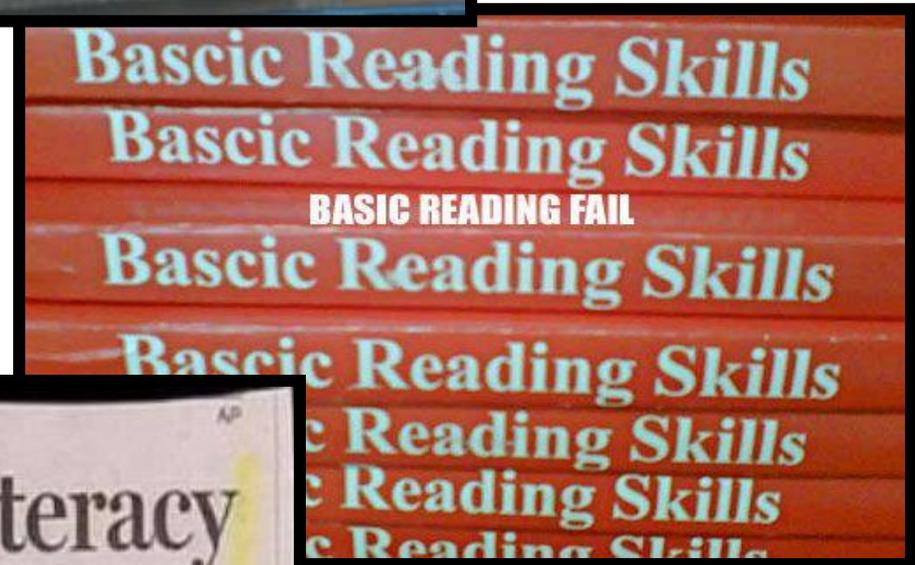
Do not allow personal bias to show in your report. Stick with the facts.

Spelling and Grammar



Misspelled words detract from a report's credibility. In fact, misspelled words can:

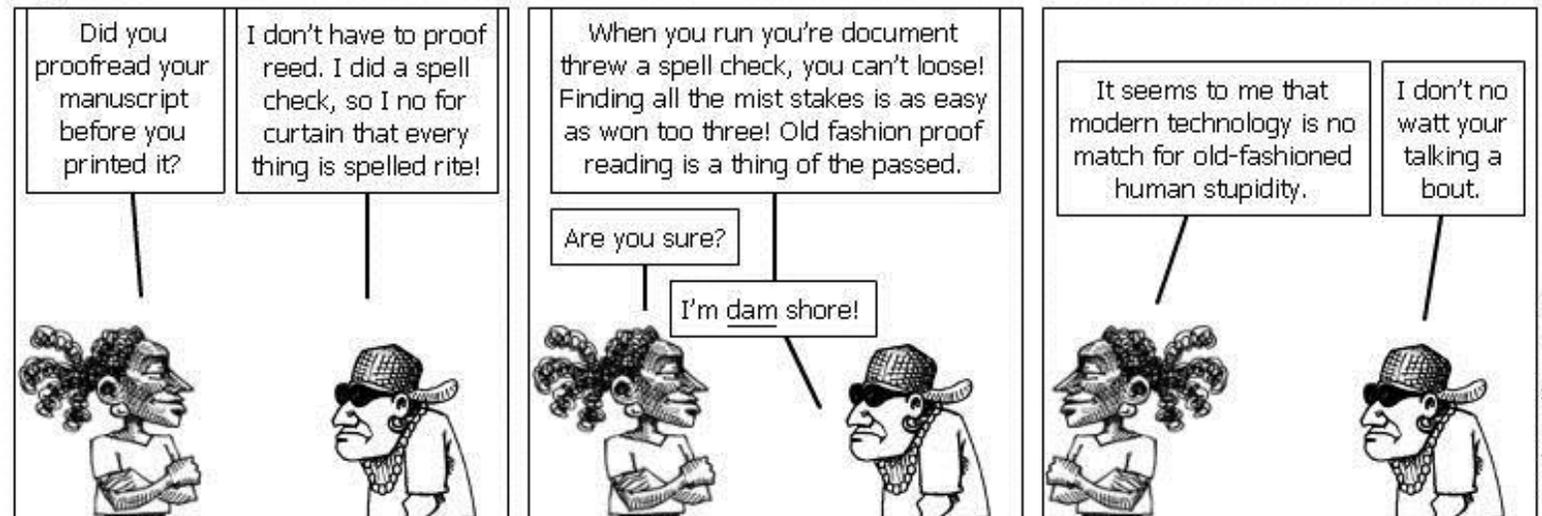
- make the staff member look careless.
- confuse the reader.
- change the meaning of a sentence.
- affect the staff member's credibility in court.



Tips to improve your spelling and grammar:

- Proofread your report; then have someone else proofread it.
- Use a dictionary and spell checker. (Remember: The computer spell checker isn't always right!)
- Keep a list of corrected words that you commonly misspell.
- Make sure your verb tenses are correct.
- Make sure you know the meaning of a word before using it, especially when using technical and medical terms.

Spell Check For Shore by Eric Perlin



Easily Confused Words

Writers often confuse and misuse these words. It's helpful to use a dictionary to look up the meaning of the word in question, but here's a short list of common problem words.



Easily Confused Words

its/it's

- **its** (possessive adjective) - belonging to people, animals, or things
Example: The company needs to do what is in *its* best interest.
- **it's** = the short form of "it is"
Example: *It's* important to understand the organization's goals before implementing any changes.

lay/lie

- **lay, laid** (present, past verb) - to put or set something down
Example: You can *lay* (present) your books over there. She *laid* (past of lay) her books on the table.
- **lie, lay** (present, past verb) - for a person or creature to recline or rest in a horizontal position
Example: Every morning, I *lie* (present) down to take a nap. Yesterday after the exam, I *lay* (past of lie) down for just five minutes.

Easily Confused Words

there/their/they're

- **there** (expletive) - it has no meaning but is used to start sentence
Example: *There* are many areas in which a manager needs to be competent; these areas include writing, speaking, critical thinking, and active listening.
- **there** (adverb) - it is used to describe a location
Example: She dumped the books over *there* and then left for school.
- **their** (possessive adjective) - belonging to people, animals, or things
Example: The employees' need to care for *their* sick relatives is a sensitive issue.
- **they're** = the short form of "they are"
Example: A person may follow rules, but *they're* not always the best guide to the right action.

Easily Confused Words

to/too/two

- **to** - used with the basic form of a verb to make the infinitive
Example: He mentioned that he liked *to watch* TV for the liquor commercials and that it made him want *to try* new drinks and beverages.
- **to** (preposition) - toward or in the direction of
Example: I went *to* the lab early in the morning.
- **too** (adverb) - more than is needed or wanted
Example: However, *too* much monitoring can have a negative effect on morale.
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Easily Confused Words

you're/your

- **you're** = the short form of “you are”
Example: Sometimes you do not know if *you're* doing well at all, since nobody tells you where you stand at each meeting.
- **your** (possessive adjective) - belonging to people
Example: Mr. Friedlander told you that the most important aspect of being human is to use *your* intelligence and reasoning abilities.



NOTES:

What to include and advantages



It is not always possible to write a report immediately after an incident has happened. Examples: Medical emergencies requiring transport, fire evacuations, and group disturbances.



When you cannot immediately write a report, make it a habit to record the facts of the situation in a pocket notebook. Notes can be an excellent memory aid when you write your report. Notes can also be used to refresh your memory when you testify in a court case.



Using the notes you take prior to actually writing is a great way to organize the report in chronological order and fill in the details. Using this system will reduce errors and add to credibility.

The most important benefit? Your reports will have a greater degree of accuracy relative to times, statements, and events than memory alone allows.



Always carry your notebook

Use your notebook only for business, not personal use. Why? This is a discoverable item, which means it is subject to subpoena for use in a legal proceeding.

Number the notebook's pages consecutively and do not remove any pages.

When the notebook is full, file it away in chronological order. This allows for future reference if needed.

Depending on the situation, you may take notes during the event, or as quickly as possible after the incident.

Essential information would include date, times, participants, witnesses, evidence and its disposition, sketches, statements, and anything else you consider relevant.



- Record events in chronological order.
- Record only facts and observations.
- Record statements accurately. They are less likely to be misinterpreted and used against you in a legal proceeding.
- Make reference to all communications and other reports concerning the incident.

Notes:

ADAMS' APPLES

...THE COLONISTS WERE PROTESTING THE BRITISH STAMP TAX.

The british made them Stamp on tacks.

...SO, IT WAS "ONE IF BY LAND AND TWO IF BY SEA."

one guy came by land and two guyz came by sea.

... AND IT BECAME KNOWN AS THE BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL.

they wur bateling for bunk beds.

ARE YOU KIDS GETTING ALL OF THIS?

OH YEAH, NO PROBLEM!



Conclusion:

A good report takes time and effort.

Good grammar and spelling matter.

By answering the who, why, what, when, where, how and why of the incident as completely as the information from the incident allows you use this report at a later time to recall events accurately.

A professionally written report reflects on your professionalism as an employee.



REMEMBER...



Report writing doesn't have to be painful.