

# **Report Writing Activities for the Criminal Justice Student**

**A Supplement to Curriculum Technology's  
*CJ Communications in the USA***

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# Objective Writing vs. Subjective Writing

## Key Activity Objectives

- Discern the key differences between objective and subjective writing
- Understand when subjective language is acceptable
- Provide an objective report for a diverse audience

## Introduction

Report writing must “tell a story” that complies with certain requirements that are not found in creative writing. One of the most important conditions is that the reporting officer must be “objective,” rather than “subjective,” in his reports.

Subjective writing is characterized by the author expressing opinions, feelings and, even in some cases, judgments. In objective writing, the author relates facts without imposing his own feelings or opinions into the narrative. When writing an official report, the author needs to be objective, without expressing any personal or professional opinions. Subjective writing has no basis in report writing, be it a news article or a police report, because the audience expects an unbiased account of events. Emotions affect our ability to think and make conclusions rationally. We may hold firmly to how people should be treated when they do something wrong, but when it directly affects us, our opinion of how serious the situation is, or how best to handle the situation is markedly different. Therefore, law enforcement reports in particular must communicate only the facts.

Sometimes it may be appropriate to be subjective and objective in a piece of non-fiction writing. If the author is writing an editorial piece about the effects of war, he may communicate objective information by providing statistical information concerning the cost of war in terms of money and lives. To make or emphasize a point, the editorial author may be subjective in adding how war had a devastating emotional effect on him or someone he knows. However, an editorial piece is, by design, based on one person’s opinion and/or experience, and is not held to the same factual standards of a news or police report.

For the purposes of report writing, individuals in the criminal justice field are expected to provide facts while withholding emotion. This allows the reporting officer to effectively provide others with the facts so that they can take the appropriate action.

Example:

A retired detective is accused of sexual assault. The investigating officer taking the initial report “filtered” out some information or down played the significance of information provided. The actions of others, i.e., supervisors, district attorneys, and judges rely on the information provided to them in reports to help determine that the most appropriate action is taken. If the initial information is faulty, the decisions based upon that information is faulty, and justice is not served.

Sometimes an author may not realize that they are being subjective in their reports. This usually happens with the author makes conclusions based upon observed behavior or information provided.

Example:

During the interview, Ms. Wilson did not maintain eye contact and was constantly moving around in her chair. When asked if she could describe the person she saw take the money from the cash register, Ms. Wilson hesitated, took a couple of seconds to respond, and said she doesn’t think she can identify the person. When asked if she had seen the person before, Ms. Wilson looked away from me and in a soft voice said, “No.”

It was very obvious that Ms. Wilson did not want to be talking to me about the crime and was very uncomfortable. When Ms. Wilson was asked to describe the person she saw take the money from the cash register, Ms. Wilson was evasive and lied to me when she said she could not identify the suspect. It was also obvious that Ms. Wilson knew the suspect because of her reaction when I asked her if she had seen the person before.

When we examine the example, the author is being objective in the first part of the report. He is reporting facts about the physical actions and the subject’s responses. But in the second paragraph, the author becomes subjective by making conclusions as to what those physical actions and responses mean. In such situations, the author should describe the facts relating to the subject’s actions and verbal responses, and allow the reader to conclude what those facts mean.

There are a couple of key concepts to keep in mind when trying to ensure that the report is objective.

- Avoid making conclusions or inferences
- Do not address emotions, thoughts, or feelings. Stay with the facts.

- Don't try to convince the reader of anything. Let the reader make conclusions based upon the facts in the report.

Report writing is not the place to be creative or make an emotional plea. Only by being objective can we have the best chance of rational, fair decisions being made.

Sample of an Objective Report:

I bought a puppy yesterday. He is a purebred American Eskimo. He is only seven weeks old and has very white fluffy hair. When we first brought him home, he spent the first couple of hours lying in one of the corners of the kitchen. After that, he jumped on the couch and lied next to my wife and fell asleep.

Sample of a Subjective Report:

I bought a puppy yesterday. When we went to look at the litter, the one I picked out had a fantastic personality. He ran up to me and acted as if we were long lost friends. When I got him home, he was a little afraid and spent the first couple of hours shivering in one of the corners of the kitchen. It was obvious that he was afraid and uncertain of his new surroundings. I had no doubt that he would become comfortable in a short period of time. Sure enough, a couple of hours later he jumped up on the couch and lied next to my wife. He was so content he fell asleep on her lap. He is going to be a fantastic dog.

## Activity

Go to "YouTube" and type in "Job Interviews." Click on the link for "Two Sample Interviews." Review one of the interviews and write two summaries of the interview you watched. One report should be objective and the other should be subjective. Remember, in the subjective report, you are free to use emotions, conclusions, and opinions, while the objective report contains facts.

In class, be prepared to discuss which of the two styles was easier to write and what made the other style harder. Present what you did in the objective report to lead the reader to a specific conclusion or if you simply reported the facts.

## Discussion Questions

1. What are some consequences that may result from a subjective report?
2. What are some situations, if any, in which the author can make conclusions in an objective report? (Example: Expert witness) How is this different from being subjective?

3. Are there any situations in which a subjective report is appropriate to be used in an investigation, administrative case, private investigation's report, or a probation report?

## Using Active Voice in Police Reports

### Key Lesson Objectives:

- Understand the importance of clear, concise writing
- Develop basic report writing skills
- Demonstrate the ability to write incident reports using active voice

### Introduction

Police officers and security personnel write reports for many types of events, from non-emergencies to violent crimes such as homicides. Whenever an officer is dispatched to a scene, a clear, concise, accurate incident report must be completed and filed, because the report may be used as evidence in the future. If used as evidence, lawyers, judges and juries will review the officer's writing as part of a case. Therefore, the report must be immediately accessible and easy for civilians to understand.

Many CJ students are uncomfortable with writing; after all, they are looking for a career in criminal justice or security, not journalism or publishing. Frequently, these students write long, expressive sentences with a high word count because they think it makes them look "smarter." This is usually not the case; in fact, longer sentences that mix verb tenses and use unnecessary vocabulary are simply harder to follow and make the writer's point vague and awkward. This is especially true in police reports. No matter what type of incident is reported, whether criminal or civil, it is essential that report writers use active voice. The use of active voice helps to make a report clear and concise, which is beneficial in the long run.

Reports that use proper, active verb tenses and that clearly describe subjects and actions lead to less confusion during the investigations process and ultimately at trial. Use of active verbs is called using "active voice." Once you get into the habit of using active voice in your writing, it will become second nature to use it in your reports.

As writers, when we use active voice, we make the subject (in the case of police reports, a person) the main actor in the situation. This means we make the subject the focus of the sentence. In short, active voice tells you "who" did "what." In a police report, this subject ("who") may be the officer, suspect, victim or witness. The verb ("what") is often, but not always, in the present tense, and indicates some form of action or movement. For instance, the following sentences use active voice. The subject is underlined, and the action is italicized.

- “The witness saw the accident.”
- “The victim answered all our questions.”
- “Mr. Jones drove the car that night.”
- “I spoke with the witnesses and took their contact information.”

Passive voice can make a sentence longer, but that does not necessarily make the sentence better. In fact, passive voice makes a sentence weaker, because the subject is acted upon, putting more importance on the act than the person. In fact, in some cases, the subject of the sentence is not even revealed, as in “Two kids were seen spray painting the wall of the city library.”

An easy way to recognize use of passive voice is to look at the content of the sentence itself. Instead of using verbs that denote some sort of action, passive voice usually use some form of “to be,” such as “are,” “is” “was” or “were.” Compare the following statements, as written in passive voice, to the ones written above. Again, the subject is underlined, and the action is italicized.

- “It was stated by the witness that she saw the accident.”
- “Questions were answered by the conscious victim.”
- “The car was driven by Mr. Jones that night.”
- “The witnesses were spoken to and their contact information was taken by me.”

Sometimes the passive voice is unavoidable; for instance, you may take a quote from a witness who is speaking in passive voice, and you must directly relate what she said without changing her words. However, use the active voice whenever it is within your control. When compiling your incident report, remember that less is more. Try to analyze your writing for situations where the active voice is more appropriate for your purposes than the passive voice.

Sentences using active and passive voice are listed below.

| <b>Examples of Active Voice</b>                                  | <b>Examples of Passive Voice</b>   |
|--|--|
| “I interviewed Mr. Smith”  | “Mr. Jones was interviewed by me.”                                       |
| “Laura obtains statements quite easily.”                         | “Statements are obtained quite easily by Laura.”                         |
| “He cooperated fully with our investigation.”                    | “He was cooperative with our investigation.”                             |
| “The suspect denies any wrongdoing.”                             | “Wrongdoing is denied by the suspect.”                                   |
| “The officers canvassed the neighboring houses for information.” | “The neighboring houses were canvassed by officers seeking information.” |

## Activity

You and your partner are dispatched to the scene of a purse snatching. During the course of your initial investigation, you interview the victim, who was crossing the street at the time her purse was snatched, and three witnesses to the event. One of those witnesses tripped the suspect as he tried to get away with the victim's purse. The suspect was knocked unconscious and is still on the scene, and conscious, upon your arrival.

While filing your case, you come across your partner's report. It reads as follows:

*My partner and I were dispatched to the scene of a purse snatching. 8:00 p.m. was our arrival time at the scene on Mulberry Street. A middle-aged man was observed on the ground; a large bruise was forming on his forehead. Three people were comforting an elderly woman on the ground; the contents of her purse were scattered on the sidewalk. The middle-aged man was assessed by me; the other individuals were interviewed by my partner. The following events were recounted by the victim and corroborated by witnesses.*

*The elderly woman was taking a walk when the middle-aged man grabbed her purse and began to run away. He was tripped by one of the witnesses, a teenage boy who was nearby. The actions were observed by the other two witnesses, sisters who were aware of other purse snatchings in the area. The elderly woman was comforted by the women, while 911 was called to the scene by the teenage boy.*

*The suspect was disoriented, and said he could not recall any of the events that were communicated by the other individuals. It was stated by the suspect that he did not know about any such crimes in the neighborhood. His residence is in another neighborhood; there was no reason provided for his presence on Mulberry Street.*

*An ambulance was called to attend to both the victim, who seemed to be in shock, and the suspect. The paramedics released the victim, who was fully alert and aware. An assessment was made of the suspect, who was then transported to the emergency room for care. Upon his release from the ER, the suspect was arrested by myself and my partner, and taken into custody.*

Rewrite this report so that it uses more active language, but the integrity and meaning of the report does not change.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why might using passive voice be a hard habit to break?
2. Can you think of any situations, other than direct quotes, where using passive voice might be unavoidable?



3. What are some tricks or reminders you might use to help keep your writing more active?

## **Chronological Writing in Police Reports**

### **Key Activity Objectives:**

- Develop a working knowledge of what constitutes a “chronological order style report”
- Demonstrate how a chronological order style report is an effective means of communicating what was done during the course of an investigation
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a chronological order style report.

### **Introduction**

The primary purpose of investigative reports is to effectively and accurately convey information from the officer (the author of the report) to the reader, who may be any number of people, including other officers, lawyers, paralegals and jury members. Quite simply, it is the author telling a story, but the story is restricted in ways that a novel is not. Effective report writing is comprised of several steps:

1. An incident occurs that required an officer to respond or take action
2. The officer responds, conducts an investigation, and takes notes
3. The officer writes a report and provides the report to specific audiences; such as supervisors, detectives, and fellow officers
4. The “audience” reads the report and is able to obtain a “picture” of what occurred

The investigative report must be factual, be devoid of bias, and provide detailed information concerning what the author saw, heard, and did. The report must also document how and from whom the information was obtained. The goal is to convey the information in such a manner that the reader can fully understand and follow along with what the author wrote. How that information is conveyed can be accomplished in a number of ways.

The two most common methods of investigative reporting are chronological order and logical order. Both are effective means of communicating with an audience, but each have different strengths and weaknesses. Logical order is an analytical approach. The logical order is divided into “topics,” such as how the crime was discovered, what was done during the course of the investigation, how the suspect was identified, and what evidence was seized. The logical order approach emphasizes what was done and learned, rather than what action occurred first.

Chronological order is the style that is most frequently used in report writing. There are several benefits to using chronological order. We are used to giving and receiving information in a chronological manner, starting with what occurred first and continuing until the conclusion. Because of this structure, people are used to information that starts at the beginning and concludes at the end. Not only is it easier for the reader to follow; it is also easier for the author to write, because the information flows with each section tying to the preceding section.

Example: "I pulled up to the residence and got out of my vehicle. As I approached the residence, John Wilson, who identified himself as the person who called the police, came up to me. After speaking with Mr. Wilson, I went into the residence and contacted Janice Adams, the victim."

If the officer started his report with the information he received from Ms. Adams, the audience will wonder what the officer did prior to meeting with Ms. Adams and how the officer learned of Ms. Adams in the first place.

When we talk about chronological order as it relates to investigative reports, there are two chronologies that come into play: the chronology as it pertains to the investigation, and the chronology as it pertains to the crime. The investigation chronology sets forth what first occurred in the investigation and follows through to the end. The crime chronology emphasizes the criminal's actions from start to finish. It is important to keep in mind that either type of chronology can be effective, depending on what the author wants to emphasize. The other important consideration is that the author is not tied to only using one of the two types of chronology, but must choose which of the types will be the predominant style in the report.

Many police supervisors and prosecutors do not advocate use of the chronology order style. An officer using this style may write too much detail concerning aspects of a case that are not critical to the investigation. Police supervisors and prosecutors are more concerned with the "topics" of the investigation: what the responding officer did, what evidence was obtained, how did the investigation establish who the suspect was. Another criticism of the chronological order style is that the reporting officer has a tendency to start sentences with "I," which strikes many readers as too informal for a legal document.

Example: "I got out of bed at 6 a.m. and went downstairs. I put on a pot of coffee and went outside and picked up the newspaper. I then came back into the house and I ate a bowl of cereal."

With practice, the writer can overcome both these obstacles by realizing that using the first person, or "I," simply cuts down on the number of words the reader has to cover. Learning to use transitional words, such as "immediately," "after," and "soon after," also helps place

events into perspective. Using transitional words, the sentence now reads, “Immediately after getting out of bed, I went downstairs. After putting on a pot of coffee, the newspaper was retrieved from outside. Sitting down at the kitchen table, I ate a bowl of cereal.”

Since chronologies deal with the order of events, they can be presented forward or reverse. When writing an investigative report, “going forward” starts with the discovery of the crime and proceeds from that event, while “going backward” starts with the investigation and goes in reverse to explore how the crime occurred.

Chronologies, as they pertain to the recording of investigative activities, shows a clear picture of an investigator’s actions and provides some insight as to why the investigator did what he did. In turn, they give the audience a chance to see how events evolved and the explanation behind certain actions.

Example: As read in court proceedings, an investigator filed a written report that, upon arrival at the scene, he spoke to a witness who saw the defendant threaten the victim. The officer wrote that he then obtained evidence that he submitted to the crime lab, and that the lab proved the evidence to be associated with the defendant. The reader of the report can readily understand why the officer concluded the defendant was the person who committed the crime.

To summarize, either the logical order style or the chronological order style may be used when submitting written reports, though the chronological style is more commonly utilized. It is important to remember that the report writer is not restricted to using only one style during the entire report. The overall style of the report may utilize the logical order style, but when the author describes the actual crime, such as a homicide, the chronological order style may be more effective. No matter which style is used, the ultimate goal is to effectively convey accurate information to the reader.

## **Activity**

The following activity allows students to practice reporting in a chronological order. It also provides opportunities to use transitional words, first person narrative.

You are the training officer for new patrol officers assigned to the burglary unit. Using the chronological order style, describe how you teach the new patrol officer to investigate a burglary. Remember one of the criticisms of the chronological order style was that too much information might be provided. Attempt to convey the information in such a manner that the essence of the activity is conveyed, but the report isn't bogged down with information that is irrelevant to what you are trying to convey to your audience.

To help you get started, the following is offered as the first step:

1. You would read the offense report to learn what the patrol officer discovered when he responded to the scene of the burglary.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. After completing the two exercises, what do you think are advantages and disadvantages of the chronological order style of report writing?
2. Do you think the chronological method is an effective method of conveying information? Why?
3. What types of reporting would not call for the chronology method?

## First Person Narrative and Other Pronoun Issues

### Key Activity Objectives:

- Recognizing the importance of first person pronouns in report writing
- Understanding the relationship between pronouns and antecedents
- Developing the skills to use proper pronouns in official reports

### Introduction

One of the most important qualities an officer can bring to the report writing process is clarity, or clearness. Because the report can be read by a wide variety of people who have different experiences with police activities, it is best to be as clear and precise, using everyday language, as possible. One way to guarantee that your report is easy to follow is to use proper pronouns, including the first person pronoun (“I”).

Many people feel awkward about using “I” in their writing, because they have been taught in school that it is important to keep personal pronouns such as “I” or “you” in your papers. For most academic papers, this is true. However, because an offense report is directly related to your personal observations and actions, it is completely appropriate to use the first person. You do not need to refer to yourself in the third person, such as “this officer” or “this writer.” In fact, referring to yourself as “I” makes your report much easier to follow. Compare the following two examples:

Upon arrival at the scene, this officer approached the suspect and ordered the suspect out of the house. He failed to comply and became increasingly verbally uncooperative. For officer safety reasons, this officer physically removed him from the house, read the Miranda Warning and placed him in the back of this officer’s police vehicle.

Upon arrival at the scene, I approached the suspect and ordered him out of the house. The suspect did not comply and became increasingly verbally uncooperative. For officer safety reasons, I physically removed the suspect from the house, read him the Miranda Warning and placed him in the back of my police vehicle.

The second report is briefer and more to the point than the first example. The average reader or speaker does not refer to himself in the third person (“this officer”), so the use of “I” will be much more accessible to jury members. Since the reporting officer signs his or her name to the report, it will be clear to the reader who is speaking to when “I” is referenced.

Other pronoun issues may come into play when writing reports. It is important to make clear connections between pronouns (which take the place of a person or object) and their antecedents (the object that has a relationship with the person or object).

In the English language, there are three cases of pronouns:

| <b>Subjective Pronouns<br/>(Pronouns as Subjects)</b> | <b>Objective Pronouns<br/>(Pronouns as Objects)</b> | <b>Possessive Pronouns</b> |
|---|---|----------------------------|
| I   | Me  | My/mine                    |
| You   | You   | Your/yours                 |
| He/she/it   | Him/her/it  | His/her (hers)/it (its)    |
| We  | Us  | Our/ours                   |
| They  | Them  | Their/theirs               |
| Who   | Whom  | Whose                      |

For instance:

Laura gave her car to Richard.

Written when substituting pronouns, the sentence reads:

She (subjective pronoun) gave the car/it (antecedent) to him (objective pronoun).

Writers commonly make errors when using pronouns; these must be avoided for clarity. The most frequent errors involve incorrect pluralization when combining pronouns and antecedents. Remember that these words indicate one person, and need to use singular pronouns: everybody, anybody, anyone, each, neither, nobody, and someone. Here are some examples of incorrect phrasing, followed by the corrected phrase.

**INCORRECT:** Every known individual must have their fingerprints taken.

**CORRECT:** Every known individual must have his or her fingerprints taken.

\*\*\*This is correct because "individual" is singular, while "their" is plural. Therefore "his or her," which also is singular, matches "individual."

**INCORRECT:** Each suspect must submit their alibi.

**CORRECT:** Each suspect must submit her alibi.

\*\*\*Again, the second sentence is correct because "suspect" is singular, while "their" is plural. Therefore "her," which also is singular, matches up with "suspect."

INCORRECT: Bob and me saw the crime occur.

CORRECT: Bob and I saw the crime occur.

\*\*\*It is grammatically incorrect to say "Me saw the crime occur;" the same rule applies when there is another subject.

When in doubt, say the sentence out loud to see if it sounds right before you write it in your report.

Like any other skill, using pronouns and first person narrative correctly requires practice; as you become more comfortable with these concepts, your report writing will become more refined.

## **Activity**

You have been dispatched to the scene of a domestic violence call. At the scene, which is a residence, you find a man, woman and child; each is upset, and each has sustained some sort of injury. The residence is in disarray. The man is verbally threatening the woman and child, who are visibly frightened. Using first person narrative and proper pronouns to indicate the people present and the objects in the surroundings, write a report detailing the scene and your actions. You have the freedom to describe the state of the residence, the type of injuries and the actions taken upon your arrival.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What reservations do you have about using first person pronouns in your report writing? What steps can you take to eliminate those reservations?
2. Why do you think so many people are confused by proper pronoun use? Why is it important to use proper pronouns in your police reports?
3. Can you think of any tips or devices to help you remember how to use pronouns with their antecedents?