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Officer Development Series



Report Writing

By Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso

Few people like writing reports and no one likes writing lengthy, detailed reports. In fact, many firefighters choose not to seek promotions simply because report writing intimidates them. I know something about this, because it intimidated me, and maybe it has the same effect on you, but this is something you can overcome.

In this article, I will provide you with tips on how to write your narrative for the remarks section of a written report, specifically, a structure fire report. Take a moment to consider this fact. Once you create and submit a report, you are locked into that document for the rest of your career. Attempting to change what you have submitted or contradicting a report can be considered highly suspicious. Detailed fire reports have always been vitally important; however, many departments have placed little emphasis to this area and have often downplayed the importance of a well-crafted narrative until, of course, they find themselves in trouble.

Incidents are documented for many reasons; the most paramount is the threat of civil litigation. If a property owner decides to take legal action, and you are subpoenaed to appear in a court of law to provide testimony, the opposing attorney will not take your word for what happened at the fire based on your memory. He or she will stress the fact that it has been several years since the incident occurred and you could not possibly remember every

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last detail. You'll try to argue your point, but when the attorney asks you to tell the court what you had for dinner the past 7 nights and you struggle to recall, he will win the argument right there. If you anticipated that question in advance and provided the court with your shopping list, you now have the upper hand. This is the same advantage you will have with a detailed and thorough report narrative.



Report writing can be tedious, but it's necessary if you intend to protect your department, and more importantly, yourself. In today's litigious society it is essential that firefighters write accurate and comprehensive fire reports. When it comes to report writing, the bottom line is; if you didn't write it down, it didn't happen.

Here are a few quick tips to take into consideration before we talk about formatting the narrative:

- The best time to write your report is when the incident is fresh in your mind.
- Don't use acronyms or abbreviations like RIC and CO. Instead, take the time to write the full words "Rapid Intervention Crew (RIC)" and "Company Officer (CO)" then you can abbreviate them if used later in the report.
- Use a format. It's smart to have a guideline to follow such as the one outlined below, but don't just cut and paste your words. Be specific and make sure you write what you did, the exact way it was done.
- Write your narrative on a word document so you can take your time, then you can easily paste it into your reporting system when you feel it is ready. This will prevent your system from timing out before you complete or save your report.
- Use spell check once your report is completed and consider having another knowledgeable firefighter read before submitting.

Formatting Your Structure Fire Report Narrative

For simplicity, I have identified 11 categories that you can use as headings for each portion (or paragraph) in your narrative. They are:

1. En Route,
2. Establish Command,
3. Size-Up Factors,
4. Initial Radio Report,
5. Resources Requested,
6. Incident Command System,
7. Strategy and Tactics,
8. Problems Encountered,
9. Under Control,
10. Transfer or Termination of Command, and
11. Additional Information.

I have found the most effective way to write my report is by listing these eleven categories in the order shown above and working my way down the report, addressing each of them when in sequential order. Doing it this way will guarantee that you don't miss an important section and exclude information from your narrative.

For copyright reasons, I cannot provide you with information that I previously had published elsewhere, but I would like to direct you to one of two places where I break down each of the above-mentioned categories, one-by-one, and discuss the information that should be included within each section. You can go the article section of www.FireOpsOnline.com for a link to my article in Fire Engineering magazine, or you can purchase a copy of the book *Fireground Operational Guides* (2011, PennWell). Once you educate yourself and fine tune your own system for writing report narratives, you will come to the realization that report writing is not as difficult as you may have once thought it to be.

Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso of the Kearny, NJ Fire Department, is a speaker, fire service instructor, and regular contributor of Fire Engineering magazine. Frank is the author of three books including *Common Valor*, *The Mentor*, and the best-selling fire service textbook *Fireground Operational Guides* (PennWell, 2011, co-authored by DC Mike Terpak). He can be reached via his website www.frankviscuso.com