



Coffee Break Training - Fire Investigation Series

Fire Investigation: Report Writing-Part 1

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Learning Objective: The student will be able to describe the elements and importance of each that are to be contained in written investigative reports.

One of the most important elements of fire and arson investigation is the written report. Written reports may be used by other investigators, courts, insurance agencies and regular citizens. As Kirk's Fire Investigation inquires, "If I were to die tomorrow and this report were the only information on this incident, how completely and accurately would it reflect what I know about this fire?" If you were no longer able to express your thoughts and opinions regarding a specific case, would your education and credibility as an investigator be reflected in the documentation of your investigation?

Not all arson cases go to trial and it is impossible to predict which ones will be prosecuted and within what time schedule. As a result, oftentimes an investigator may be subpoenaed to testify on an incident that occurred years prior. The written report is the investigator's best tool when preparing a case for court that captures what happened and will help the investigator recollect the incident and its specific details. Charles and Gregory O'Hara write in the *Fundamentals of Criminal Investigations*, "The effectiveness of an investigator is judged in large measure by the reports of investigations. If an otherwise satisfactory investigation is poorly reported, the reputation of the investigator suffers."

The report must include and the investigator must be able to explain, simply, what event(s) were brought together to cause a fire. A complete and detailed report containing photos, diagrams/charts, sketches, evidence log, photo log, witness interview logs, incident report, etc., is an investigator's best tool when preparing a case for court.

There are many types of reports used in today's fire service. The fire incident reports, inspection reports, and fire investigation reports just to name a few. A well-written report gives credibility to the investigator. It says something about the investigator's education, training, competence, and shows professionalism. Care should be taken when preparing the report to avoid street language or slang.

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