



Fire Investigation: Report Writing—Part 3

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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.

Speaking of evidence, all documents pertaining to evidence should be a part of the report. This includes collection photographs and the evidence log as well the evidence transmission log to secure a chain of custody.

Laboratory reports should also be a part of the report. A summary of the lab results may head up the report, but the original document that identifies the lab, the technician, the tests performed, and the results should be included.

Finally witness reports or any other written documents should be included. This includes witness statements, law enforcement reports, and insurance documents obtained through the use of an immunity letter. Any financial or personal documents, as well as any other documents that may be pertinent to the incident, should be a part of the investigative report.

There has been much discussion on the inclusion of field notes in the final report. While each jurisdiction has specific protocols regarding this point, National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 921, *Guide for Fire and Explosion Investigations*, Section 15.3.4 states that retention of any documents including field notes is the best practice.

Lastly, let us discuss the format of the report. While many agencies have specific forms or computer programs to generate investigative reports, the basic format is the same. A report is not a narrative or an essay. We are not telling a story or giving a subjective description. Equally, it is not a series of blunt bullet points. A report is a well-written statement of evidence with conclusions. It is an analysis of the data of the investigation, written in an objective, logical, and factual way. A report has a definite structure. It is arranged in a way that the reader can easily find the information he or she requires. A structure also makes it easier for the writer to arrange thoughts in a logical flow and to write a readable report. In its simplest form, a report will consist of a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The beginning, the Introduction, sets the scene by informing the reader what the report is all about and what it intends to achieve. The middle section, the Findings, is the most important part of the document where the details of the findings are delivered, and the arguments developed. The Findings section has a logical structure, is written in clear language, and is organized into appropriate headings and subheadings. This clarifies the report's aim and ensures the reader's interest is maintained. The end, the Conclusion, must follow on naturally from the main body of the report. We arrive at a conclusion and we guide the reader to a series of recommendations or opinions.

A well-written report is like a well told joke, it funnels the reader down to the punch line:

- Introduction—sets the scene;
- Findings—gives the detail; and
- Conclusion—lands the punch line.

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