

How to Write an Investigation Report

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Report Writing...The Cool Part of Your Job

Richard Brinsley Sheridan famously wrote, “Easy writing is very hard reading.” In other words, make it hard on yourself as a writer to make it easy on the reader. Report writing is not the most glamorous part of a security professional’s job, but it is arguably the most important. The investigation report is the calling card of the security professional and serves as the official document of record, an aspect which can be overwhelming considering the ramifications of documenting an insider threat or the loss of classified. The investigation report is a reflection of the security investigator’s thoroughness as an author as well as the Industrial Security Department’s professionalism in documenting compliance with company policy and government directive.

Answering the Interrogatives

When conducting an investigation the basics of who, what, where, when, why, and how are collected. However, when writing an investigation report the ‘who’ is not only those parties involved in the incident but also the reader. The audience of an investigation report can be in-house legal counsel, site or program executive leadership, government customers, or even jurors in a civil or criminal case. Taking into consideration all possibilities for the audience should raise an awareness for the security professional as the details of the incident proper are documented; knowing the audience will enable the author to avoid certain pitfalls of subjectivity and biasness. It is easier said than done when attempting to write an investigation report and clearly relay the situation as it is understood to have happened. A good report will have an opening which sets a baseline foundation and depending upon the complexity of the matter may have a simple bottom line up front summary. The subsequent portions of the investigation report will provide the reader with a storyline presenting facts, information, and investigative results in a clear and organized way. Someone who is not familiar with the event will understand what

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occurred after reading the report without the need for the author to further explain anything. While the security professional is likely not composing mystery novels, the written investigation report can make a lasting impression on the reader.

The Importance of Notes

Security professionals should be good note takers. It is important to know the precise time an officer or investigator responded to an identified location, who else was at the scene, or the actions taken by varying parties at the scene. It is recommended notes be marked with initials and the date/time of composition due to the fact notes are discoverable by attorneys when legal cases are filed. Any experienced security professional can tell the tale of when maintaining accurate notes saved the day when being asked pointed questions about incident details in a matter that occurred months, or even years, earlier; notes and reports endure when memories fade. Notes must be readable, accurate, and concise as they serve as building blocks converted to sentences, which are then compiled into a report proper.

Attribution and Interpretation

Information must be attributed with the written investigation report. Setting the scene requires documented specifics of an individual at a given location committing an action at a point in time. Attribution is the spelling out of those details with clarity for the reader. One of the goals of the written report is to not allow room for interpretation. There are simple writing tips which guide the reader instead of allowing the reader to arrive at an unwanted conclusion. Create a mental picture of the scene for the reader by telling a story within the framework of what happened, step-by-step from start to finish. Writing in chronological order, presenting all the facts in the order in which they happened makes it much easier to understand what happened. Use the past tense, because everything being written about has already occurred. Good security reports use simple words and the active voice when report facts, not opinions. There exists a wide gap between the facts that an “individual had difficulty walking, had slurred speech, had bloodshot eyes, and smelled of alcohol” versus the opinion of the “individual is drunk.” Opinions can inappropriately pass judgment by the author.

Other Things to Avoid

Mistakes in grammar, tense, agreement, and spelling will decrease the reader’s confidence in both the report and the author. Jargon is specialist vocabulary for a particular subject or profession and should not be used in reports unless in specific scenarios such as documenting a witness interview word for word where the witness uses jargon. Jargon and acronyms both need further clarification if introduced into the investigation report. Avoid wordiness, poetic language, and redundancy with the notion brevity is key. A more formal written report will not use pronouns in an effort to avoid confusion with gender and identity.

Authority and Determination

Elements often missed within an investigation report are those related to authority and determination. An investigation report must also include the details of program and policy, meaning the specifics of which contract the information or materials is associated with. If company policy or government regulation was violated by the culpable individual then those policies and regulations need to be identified in a comparative, compliance manner of clarifying what happened did not meet the appropriate standard. As the security professional being the

author, no one is better suited to identify deficiencies and culpability, and it is safe to say a customer is expecting as much. Just as the wrong-doing is identified, the matter of next steps should be presented as a guideline of the actions to be taken towards making amends; these next steps may be disciplinary action and retraining per company policy.

Conclusion

An investigation report is written to document who did what while answering the additional questions of where, how, and the most important why. Attorneys in litigation proceedings often say, "If it isn't on paper, it didn't happen." The reader has every right and is almost guaranteed to ask questions. There is no good answer to the question, "Why isn't it in your report?" The security professional earns a reputation for the quality of reports written. Investigation reports matter; so, take the time and effort to ensure what is documented is accurate and easy to read. The credibility of the individual security professional, the industrial security department, or even the company as a whole may depend on it.