

Basic Training Module Specifications

<u>Functional Area:</u>	II. Patrol Procedures
<u>Subject Area:</u>	D. Report Writing
<u>Module Title:</u>	1. OBTAINING INFORMATION AND PREPARING REPORTS
<u>Hours:</u>	Not less than 12 hours

Notes to Instructor:

The MCOLES designed this training module to be administered by instructors with expertise in law enforcement report writing. The expectation is that individual instructors will contribute relevant detail in the form of lesson plans, resource materials, and practical exercises for this training module.

The ability of a law enforcement officer to write a report can be significantly improved through proper training and enough practice. Using writing exercises in the classroom, structured on reality-based scenarios, is essential for acquiring report writing skills. Although this is not an English course, the general rules of grammar, clarity, and sentence structure apply to law enforcement report writing, as expected outcomes include the ability to document incidents and to communicate effectively.

The training is also intended to enable students to better identify the issues and make appropriate decisions in determining what should be included in a written report when handling a call. Although basic knowledge acquisition is an important component of any training, the focus should be on experiential (contextual) learning and interactive training in the classroom.

Students will be subjected to a variety of role plays and practical exercises throughout their basic training experience. Therefore, MCOLES requires that students write reports as a part of these exercises, particularly during training in domestic violence, child abuse, and traffic crash investigation, as reports in these areas are required by law.

Module Objectives start on the next page:

II.D.1.1. Participate in a Facilitated Discussion Regarding the Importance of Report Writing.

- a. Using a table-top scenario or a video clip that depicts a law enforcement officer's response to a reported crime, actively participates in a facilitated discussion of the incident by evaluating:
  - (1) relevant information that may be needed for the report;
  - (2) how information can best be identified and collected at the scene;
  - (3) why it is important to write complete, accurate reports; and
  - (4) how context may affect report writing.
  
- b. Explains the basic steps for an effective and meaningful report writing process, including:
  - (1) gathering information;
  - (2) recording information;
  - (3) organizing information;
  - (4) writing the report; and
  - (5) reviewing the report.

Notes to Instructor

Placing the facilitated discussion first is intentional. In the classroom, instructors can generate an interactive discussion with the students by asking questions like “why is a report necessary,” “who is responsible for writing a report,” “what information should be included,” and “how can you best capture the true nature of the incident (context).” Understandably, the students will not have all the answers to the instructors’ questions but will nevertheless be able to make valuable contributions to the discussions. The intent is for the instructors, through such discussions, to provide meaning for the objectives that follow.

A domestic violence situation may be particularly useful for the scenario in II.D.1.1. because of the complexities involved in such situations. An interactive discussion or class debate can provide context for both this objective and the report writing objectives that follow. Learning occurs when students encounter real problems that simulate work related situations. Report writing does not take place in isolation. It must be taught in its full context.

II.D.1.2. Identify the Common Characteristics of a Written Report.

- a. Defines a report as any document, recorded on an agency or departmental form, or other approved medium, which is maintained as a permanent record.
- b. Determines that written reports contain certain common components, including:
  - (1) a section for filling-in the blanks or boxes, which typically captures information regarding:
    - (a) incident location;
    - (b) date/time of incident, complainant, and type of call;
    - (c) victim, suspect, witness, and injury descriptors;
    - (d) evidence, weapons, and arrests; and
    - (e) addresses and contact phone numbers;
  - (2) the report summary, which includes a brief, overall description of the incident and the actions taken by the primary officer;
  - (3) the report narrative, which chronologically details:
    - (a) who, what, where, when, how and why (if known);
    - (b) the actions and observations of the responding officer; and
    - (c) direct, circumstantial, and physical evidence; and
  - (4) supplementary information, which includes:
    - (a) verbatim written statements from the victim, witnesses, or complainants;
    - (b) evidence collected at the scene;
    - (c) photographs, crime scene sketches, or diagrams; and
    - (d) the results of follow-up inquiries.
- c. Determines that written reports, as effective means of communication, are used on the job for a variety of reasons, including:
  - (1) the documentation of an incident or occurrence;
  - (2) departmental follow-up investigations;
  - (3) court testimony and case prosecution;
  - (4) planning for future law enforcement services;
  - (5) data collection for crime analyses and community policing initiatives;
  - (6) risk management; and
  - (7) information for setting conditions for pre-trial release.
- d. Recognizes that the ability to write quality reports can enhance the professionalism of the officer and his or her agency, can improve the effectiveness of case prosecution, and can enhance the officer's promotional and professional opportunities.

II.D.1.2. Identify the Common Characteristics of a Written Report (continued).

- e. Identifies the various types of written reports including,
  - (1) administrative reports, which address internal functions of the department, such as:
    - (a) internal operational memoranda;
    - (b) the documentation of grievance procedures;
    - (c) ongoing internal affairs investigations;
    - (d) citizen complaints; and
    - (e) staffing; and
  - (2) operational reports, which document:
    - (a) criminal offenses;
    - (b) arrests;
    - (c) investigations, including follow-up investigations;
    - (d) traffic crashes; and
    - (e) evidence tracking (chain of custody).

Notes to Instructor:

Although there are various types of written reports, and various uses for these reports, the emphasis of the training in this module is on *offense* reports.

For objective II.D.1.2., instructors should emphasize the common elements of the typical offense report and discuss the importance of documenting information within the context of a response to an incident. Instructors can build on what was discussed in objective II.D.1.1.

MCOLES suggests that instructors distribute various types of reports for class discussion.

Complete and accurate reports are necessary for the judicial process to proceed fairly. The report will reflect the direct knowledge of the responding officers and therefore must withstand critical review and legal scrutiny.

For example, for domestic violence situations, instructors should discuss the role of evidence-based prosecutions and the importance of identifying and documenting physical and circumstantial evidence at the scene to build a case. The purpose of an evidence-based prosecution is to introduce physical evidence of battering, so the case does not rest *only* on the testimony or statements of the survivor. Therefore, great care ought to be taken by the primary officer to ensure completeness and accuracy when preparing the report.

II.D.1.3. Gather Information at the Scene for Reports.

- a. Responds immediately to the scene of an incident and:
  - (1) stabilizes the scene by stopping any dangerous activity;
  - (2) determines if assistance or medical aid is needed;
  - (3) calms victims and witnesses by maintaining a professional demeanor;
  - (4) maintains officer safety and the safety of the participants;
  - (5) recognizes dangerous or potentially dangerous behaviors; and
  - (6) protects the crime scene.
- b. Manages the scene by:
  - (1) considering relevant information provided by dispatch;
  - (2) determining the nature of the call (criminal or civil);
  - (3) locating and identifying potential physical evidence at the scene; and
  - (4) identifying victims, complainants, and witnesses;
- c. Takes accurate field notes in preparation for the report by:
  - (1) determining what happened;
  - (2) asking relevant questions and repeating information back;
  - (3) locating and documenting physical evidence;
  - (4) documenting injuries and potential injuries;
  - (5) separately interviewing those with information; and
  - (6) separating facts from conclusions.
- d. Recognizes that capturing the contextual nature of the incident will help others understand the significance of the suspect's behavior, or the victim's response to that behavior, so appropriate criminal justice interventions can occur.
- e. Recognizes that field notes are the foundation of the formal written report and should be organized, neat, and accurate and will be examined and read by others, including supervisors, citizens, defense attorneys, and prosecutors.

Notes to Instructor:

Once on the job, officers will be writing reports under a wide variety of circumstances. Often, there will be pressure to hurry a report, or perhaps not include enough information in the report, so the officer can resume patrol or respond to the next call. There may even be a time lapse between gathering and obtaining information and actually writing the report. Ultimately, the students will experience such real-world pressures once on the job. Instructors should prepare the students for such realities.

Emphasize that capturing the contextual nature of the incident is important as well. Offenses do not occur in isolation. Understanding context improves the system's response to victims of crime.

II.D.1.4. Organize Information in Preparation for Writing the Report.

- a. Reviews field notes thoroughly to determine if:
  - (1) additional information is needed;
  - (2) clarifying questions are necessary;
  - (3) all relevant descriptions are included;
  - (4) the notes are organized properly; and
  - (5) the notes contain facts only, with no officer opinions.
- b. Determines the correct chronological order of events based on witness and victim statements and on physical evidence.
- c. Identifies the proper headings in the report, depending on the nature of the call, by including sections for:
  - (1) the summary;
  - (2) the narrative;
  - (3) weapons;
  - (4) witness, victim, and suspect identifiers and descriptors; and
  - (5) physical evidence
- d. Reviews field notes to ensure that all relevant information is documented prior to writing the report, including:
  - (1) multiple addresses for witnesses, victims, and complainants;
  - (2) cell phone numbers;
  - (3) information that may be the target of defense discovery;
  - (4) alternative contact phone numbers and addresses;
  - (5) information that assists in determining probable cause; and
  - (6) information that helps create the context or the nature of the call.

Notes to Instructor:

Organizing information is an essential step that should be taken prior to writing a report. Students must take time to ensure that their field notes are complete, accurate, and organized properly.

Although it is the responsibility of the primary officer to take field notes and complete a report, it should be emphasized that the reports will be read and used by those who have no direct knowledge of the facts of a situation. Moreover, those who write reports must take into account all the potential uses of the report.

“Discovery” (d (3) above) generally refers to the legal burden placed on the prosecution to divulge exculpatory information to the defense. Information that may be favorable to the defendant must be included in the report in order for it to be complete. If such information is omitted, even by mistake, it will seem as if the reporting officer is trying to prejudice the situation in favor of the prosecution.

II.D.1.5. Prepare Reports.

- a. Writes a report of a specific incident or occurrence that includes:
  - (1) a summary of the events;
  - (2) observations made by the officer at the scene;
  - (3) the officer's investigation at the scene;
  - (4) the elements of the offense if a criminal matter;
  - (5) suspect, witness, victim, and complainant identifiers;
  - (6) photographs, crime scene sketches, and diagrams;
  - (7) the status of the incident; and
  - (8) written statements.
- b. Properly fills-in the blanks or boxes in a formatted report form and includes all relevant information.
- c. Includes accurate quotes from those involved by placing quotation marks around actual statements and does not use quotation marks when paraphrasing.
- d. Uses correct grammar, standard English, and proper sentence structure, which includes:
  - (1) using active voice, first person, past tense, for documenting the actions and observations of the officer;
  - (2) using active voice, third person, past tense for documenting statements provided by the victims, witnesses, and complainants;
  - (3) avoiding "this officer", "the undersigned", "this writer", etc.;
  - (4) using proper names, instead of "the victim", "witness #1", etc.; and
  - (5) ensuring there is grammatical agreement between verbs and subjects.
- e. Prepares narratives, which will be read by others not at the scene, that are:
  - (1) factual, where no information is intentionally altered;
  - (2) complete, where all relevant information is included in the report;
  - (3) clear, where there is no confusion when read by others;
  - (4) concise, where the writer avoids using unnecessary words, repeating information, or including irrelevant information;
  - (5) accurate, where the report reflects an objective accounting of relevant facts; and
  - (6) timely, where the report is reviewed and turned-in as soon as possible.

Notes to Instructor:

The best way to learn how to write proper reports is to write many reports. The more a student is able to practice writing, in the manner taught, the better he or she will be as a report writer. Their abilities will improve over time. Therefore, instructors are urged to provide classroom practical exercises that provide the students with ample opportunities to write. A table-top scenario, or a video that depicts a real-life incident and response, is an excellent way to provide fact patterns for the students to document in a report.

Headings are an important part of the report format and specific headings will be determined by the type of offense being documented. For some offenses, formatted report forms should be used (for example, the UD-10 or the standard domestic violence report form).

There are some headings that are common to most every law enforcement report. These include:

- Summary
- Venue
- Victim identifiers (including relationships)
- Suspect identifiers (including relationships)
- Witnesses identifiers (including complainant)
- Scene (a description and steps taken to protect it)
- Property
- Weapons
- Injuries (and whether anyone was transported)
- Evidence seized and secured (including circumstantial and exculpatory)
- Narrative (including contextual information)
- Officer observations and actions
- Status/Disposition
- Statements

Many agencies will have formatted report forms, often in electronic format, that will be compliant with Michigan Incident Crime Reporting (MICR) requirements. Types of records in MICR include administrative, offense, offender, victim, arrest, and property categories for reporting purposes. Information regarding the MICR program may be obtained from the Michigan State Police Criminal Justice Information Center.



II.D.1.6. Review and Submit Written Reports.

- a. Recognizes the importance of a thorough review by the writer prior to submitting the report to others.
- b. Reviews and edits the report, when necessary, to ensure that:
  - (1) it is complete and contains all the essential information;
  - (2) it is legible and professional in appearance;
  - (3) all the blanks and boxes are appropriately completed and checked;
  - (4) headings and sub-headings are used properly;
  - (5) the report is clear and concise and does not include unnecessary information; and
  - (6) the spelling and grammar are correct, and the report is free from “legalese” or police jargon.
- c. Ensures that all information is correctly copied from the field notes into the report form and makes additions or deletions as necessary for accuracy and completeness.
- d. Submits the report in a timely manner and understands the importance of knowing and following individual agency policies and procedures regarding the responsibilities of report writing.

**Module History**

Revised July 2008