

On Writing Police Reports

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*There is no way of writing well and
also of writing easily*—TROLLOPE.

POLICE reports are necessary to preserve the facts of an investigation and make them available to the prosecution in the preparation of its case for trial. For these reasons they should, as a general rule, be statements of fact written in simple every-day language, their object being to inform not entertain. Often they are read by other departments and, if carelessly written, will reflect not only on their writer but on the Force as a whole to which he belongs.

Policemen do not have to be authors or men of letters, but they should be able to write clearly, accurately and briefly, and the educational standard of the R.C.M.P. is high enough to ensure that members of the Force will write intelligible reports either in English or French.

To write one must think. Confused, loose writing results from confused thinking. At best a vague idea can be but vaguely expressed, whereas a clear idea practically will express itself. So above all get straight in your own mind what you wish to say before putting it down for others to read. Planning is the basis of good writing. Before a constable starts his report he should review the details in his mind, refer to his notes and decide what to include, for not all the

information obtained in an investigation is important or relevant. Generally speaking, opinions are taboo; simply set down the facts. But if it be advisable to express an opinion, give the facts on which it is based.

Needless repetition is an annoying and all-too-common fault which, besides lengthening the report, might mislead the reader. It sometimes results from failure to record the events to be told strictly in the order of their occurrence, and is the least excusable of all bad writing habits because, being so apparent, it is the easiest to avoid. As a rule, facts should be set down chronologically; failing this, they should be given in such a way as to assure the best interpretation. Be accurate, specific and comprehensive. A wise policy is: never submit a report before reading it carefully, and if repetitions occur re-write it and leave them out.

Good writing implies the correct choice of words. "The difference", said Mark Twain, "between the right and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." Any attempt to cover the subject of semantics in a short article would be futile, and certainly I am not trying to do so here. But for those with average vocabularies I recommend the use of a thesaurus, which is, so to speak, a dictionary in reverse, where words are arranged according to the thoughts they suggest. This text-book aids one in choosing the right word and is inexpensive and simple to use. To be told that the English language is rich in synonyms is perhaps not helpful to anyone unfamiliar with words, but a thesaurus will simplify the task of exact narration.

Writing, like everything else worthwhile, improves with practice. "Practice is nine tenths", said Emerson, and though a certain facility comes with experience good report writing is hard work.