



Coffee Break Training - Fire Investigation Series

Fire/Arson and Explosion Investigation Curriculum: Releasing the Fire Scene

No. FI-2013-4 May 20, 2013

Learning Objective: The student will be able to identify the basic steps that should be completed prior to releasing the fire scene back to the responsible party.

During the investigative process, there are several critical steps that must be completed prior to releasing the fire scene to the owner. It is the investigator's responsibility to ensure that all of these steps have been completed and documented.

The following checklist can assist investigators in completing the necessary steps during the preliminary fire scene examination to avoid potential problems such as having to return to the scene to collect information or evidence that was initially overlooked:

- Examine and document all exterior and interior areas noting construction, utilities, venting and damage/burn patterns. Reconstruct the scene to determine its prefire layout. Firefighters and occupants can assist in showing investigators where items were before the scene was altered.
- Has the area of origin been identified? The scene investigation should conclusively determine the area(s) of origin.
- Has a cause determination been made? Have all reasonable accidental causes been examined and eliminated or a single accidental cause identified and documented? The cause determination should include identification of the heat, fuel and action(s) or circumstances that brought the heat and ignition source together under the right conditions for a fire to occur (i.e., ignition sequence).
- Has all evidence been collected and submitted for testing? All evidence should be properly packaged and stored for transport prior to closing out the scene examination. The chain of custody must be maintained at all times. Investigators should remember to properly specify tests and enumerate exhibits in the evidence transmittal letter to the laboratory.
- Has all written and photographic documentation been completed? Make sure that all notes, preliminary reports, photographs and sketches have been completed in accordance with agency policies, standard operating procedures, and recommended guidelines.
- Have all witnesses present at the scene been interviewed and documented? Although there will be time during the follow-up investigation to interview witnesses, it is usually best to conduct an initial interview of witnesses present at the fire scene. The type(s) of documentation required should be determined by the investigator, agency and/or prosecutor in accordance with applicable policies, procedures and state laws.

Investigators can avoid potential problems such as alteration and destruction of evidence and loss of valuable information and leads by not releasing the fire scene until it has been properly examined and documented.



Investigators must ensure that all preliminary investigative tasks are completed prior to releasing the fire scene. (Photo courtesy of Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives)