Learning Objective: *This article will assist the student with writing an incident report in a clear, concise and accurate format.*

It is 0400 hours, and you just returned to the station from running back-to-back alarms. You think to yourself, "The medical report won't take too long, but the car fire report is going to take at least 30 minutes, so maybe if I cut a few corners on these, I can get an hour and a half of sleep." Two months later, you are called into the chief's office. The insurance company of that 4 a.m. car fire has requested a copy of your fire report. The report was littered with errors and not completely filled out. You have just embarrassed your department and lost your integrity as a fire officer. Was that extra hour and a half of sleep worth it?

If anyone has had this experience, you are not alone. More than 22 million incidents each year are reported to the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS), the world's largest fire incident reporting database. How many of these reports do you think are requested each day by stakeholders such as insurance companies, lawyers, and others? Is your report error-free, concise, and in a logical order? This Coffee Break Training focuses on fire and medical calls.

Characteristics of a Good Report

Accurate and Specific: Accuracy applies to dates, times, names, addresses, phone numbers, medications and so on. These reports are reviewed by other agencies and professions; a bad report can make your organization look unprofessional. Reports must be accurate according to your department's standard operating procedures (SOPs) or medical protocols. When additional information becomes available after the initial reports are submitted (e.g., Cause of Ignition, Fire Dollar Loss, and Casualties), the reports should be updated. If you deviate from SOPs or protocols, you must state why you deviated from them. Avoid using technical jargon. Write the report so anyone can understand it. Use normal sentence capitalization; DO NOT WRITE IN ALL CAPS! Fire service reports are written in standard business format.

Well–Organized: After you have collected your notes, you can mentally organize your report. On complex incidents, write in logical order, develop templates, and include useful headings.

Written in Logical Order: The type of alarm will determine logical order. Common forms of logic include chronological, general to specific, more important to less important, problem/solution, spatial, and cause and effect.

Uses Templates and Headings: When a writer uses a template as a standard writing style, reports are completed quickly and contain more accurate information. Well-written reports are complete reports that allow readers to recall specific details many years later. Finished reports provide the following: who, what, where, when, how and sometimes why. Below are useful template headings:

- Dispatch information.
- En route and arrival information.
- On-scene information.
- Command information.
- Crew assignments.
- Actions taken.
- Results of actions taken.
- Investigation.
- Disposition.

In Summary

Follow your headings, avoid using technical jargon, avoid acronyms, and use a business format. We always train with our feet hitting the street, but we must remember that everything ends with the written document. When submitting reports in NFIRS, carefully choose codes to aptly describe the incident in detail and update your reports as more information is obtained.

For an in-depth look at writing and oral communication in the fire service, I urge you to take the "Communications for Emergency Services Success" (R0107) course at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland (http://www.usfa.fema.gov/nfa/catalog).

Created by: John Weber and the Class of R0107 1/31/14

U.S. Fire Administration Reference: For more information, this book is available from the Learning Resource Center:

Icove, D.J., & Henry, B.P. Expert report writing: best practices for producing quality reports.