

CHAPTER 6

FIELD NOTES AND REPORTING

Objectives

- 1) Understand the importance of field notes.
- 2) List the six interrogatory investigative questions.
- 3) Understand formats for basic incident reports.
- 4) Discuss aids to information gathering.
- 5) Summarize report approval and disposition processes.
- 6) List elements common to incident reports.
- 7) Explain techniques involved in writing effective reports.

Overview

Field notes play a significant role in every criminal investigation. They provide a short written record of events, times, places, suspects, witnesses, and other information, and they are used as the basis of incident/offense reports. The importance of taking effective and complete notes in every investigation, regardless of the offense, should not be underestimated. Because field notes are more reliable than a person's memory, they can be used as a source of specific facts and details that otherwise might be forgotten. Detailed field notes also reduce the need to recontact victims and witnesses regarding information that was overlooked or questions that were not asked in the initial contact. Moreover, it is not uncommon for officers to testify in court several months or years later regarding a particular investigation. Comprehensive field notes not only help refresh the investigator's memory but also strengthen his or her court testimony.

This chapter examines several aspects of the field note and report writing process. After discussing field notes and the basic and primary questions that need to be asked in an investigation, it addresses the importance of completing well-prepared incident/offense reports. Incident report formats vary among law enforcement agencies. Despite the variation, however, there are common elements that should be included in all reports. Investigators should gain as much information as possible when arriving at the crime scene. Even facts and details that seem unnecessary at first may later prove to be highly valuable for the investigation.

Aids to information are also discussed in this chapter. Investigators will often interview witnesses and victims who may be unable to provide or articulate important details. Visual and descriptive aids such as suspect description forms and photographs of weapons can improve the information-gathering process. After presenting a brief overview on the growing use of mobile data terminals and other computerized tools that facilitate the report-writing process, the chapter concludes with a discussion on how to write effective reports.

Lecture Notes

I. Field Notes

A. The Importance of Field Notes

Field notes are the shorthand written record made by police officers from the time they arrive at the scene until the assignment is completed. The following factors form the importance of field notes:

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