

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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Table of Contents Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation

1. Understanding the eBook Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation

- Personalized Recommendations
- Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation User Reviews and Ratings
- Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation and Bestseller Lists
- 5. Accessing Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation Free and Paid eBooks
 - Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation Public Domain eBooks
 - Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation eBook Subscription Services
 - Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation Compatibility with Devices
 - Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation
 - Interactive Elements Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation
- 8. Staying Engaged with Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation
 - Setting Reading Goals Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation

- Fact-Checking eBook Content of Sample Field Notes For Criminal Investigation
- Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
- 14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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