

Chapter 1

Why Is Report Writing Important?

Think back to when you first decided on a code enforcement career. What attracted you? Chances are it *wasn't* report writing. Inspectors frequently say that writing is *not* a favorite task: It's time consuming, tiring, and exacting—and there are serious consequences if they make a mistake.

But report writing is essential to your career as a code professional, and writing becomes even more important as you advance up the career ladder. In fact it can even help your superiors decide that you're qualified for promotions and greater responsibility.

Your reports are the catalysts that cause unsafe conditions and violations to be corrected. Just identifying a problem isn't enough. In most cases, compliance with improperly written notices or orders is not mandatory. By definition, notices of violation that lack key elements, such as code section and time limits for correction, are not legal notices at all.

First Impressions

Don't judge a book by its cover. You've heard it a thousand times, and like most people, you probably ignore this sage advice at times. But evidence of the importance of first impressions is all around you. Publishers invest millions of dollars on slick covers that grab your attention as you stare at the rack of paperbacks in the airport newsstand. Stores spend vast amounts of money on window displays designed to lure you inside.

First impressions matter. You get only one chance. Business owners, design professionals, citizens, and other public officials will make an unconscious snap judgment the moment they

meet you for the first time. In the inspection business, that first impression will often involve your report rather than your person.

In the wake of the 2003 Station Nightclub fire in which 100 people were killed, copies of previous fire inspections reports were published in newspapers and online. Reporters, attorneys, members of the grand jury, and the public got their first impression of West Warwick, Rhode Island's fire inspector, as they looked at those images. Those readers were likely to have little technical expertise in fire and building codes, so they evaluated the fire inspector's competence based on grammar, penmanship, and completeness.

Setting the Record Straight

Is there ever a time you should write a report, even though your agency policy doesn't require one? Consider this case from Reading, Pennsylvania. In *Mary Ann Ciarlone v. City of Reading*, a landlord and her three tenants alleged that the City of Reading violated their Fourth Amendment and Fourteenth Amendment rights when city code inspectors used a sledgehammer to execute an administrative search warrant. The case presented the novel legal question of whether force may be used to execute an administrative search warrant to conduct a routine property maintenance inspection.

A friend of Ms. Ciarlone videotaped the warrant service and posted it on YouTube. In addition to alleging that the warrant was not supported by probable cause and was unreasonably executed, the plaintiffs also contended that the City violated their Fourteenth Amendment substantive due process rights because the City allegedly retaliated against Ms. Ciarlone and singled out the property for the use of a sledgehammer. The inspector's written reports were key evidence in Federal Court.

After a two-week trial, the jury found in favor of the defendants (City employees).

In the Ciarlone case, the inspectors knew there would be repercussions, and a lawsuit was possible. Ms. Ciarlone told them up front to get the warrant: She would not willingly allow them to enter her property. As in this case, there will be inspections where your instincts tell you *there is more to come*. Follow your instincts. Record the details in a report while they are fresh in your mind, even if you are not directed to do so. Write a narrative report for the file. Write down exactly everything that occurred and everything that was said. It could be the best career decision you ever make.

What Goes into a Good Report?

Report writing can sound intimidating if you're new to code enforcement. It's important to know, however, that several factors are working to your advantage. First, you're already a writer. The writing skills you learned in school will give you a good foundation to build on as you learn about report writing.

Second, help is available if you need to brush up on grammar and usage. Here's a summary of the skills you need to write effective sentences, paragraphs, and reports:

- three comma rules (page 103)
- two ways to use apostrophes (page 119)
- four pronoun rules (page 127)
- five rules for capital letters (page 145)
- four subject-verb agreement rules (page 139)

In addition, you need to master technical code vocabulary, and you need to watch for some commonly misused words (*your/you're*, *to/too*, *break/brake*, and others—see pages 179-88).

And here's a tip: The chapters about Avoiding Common Errors (page 157) and Myths about Grammar (page 163) are short and readable, and they can teach you a lot about writing in a short time.

All the writing skills you need are covered in this book, and practice exercises and answers are included. You can also ask family members, friends, and co-workers to look at your writing and help you spot problem sentences. Take note: With practice, *every inspector* can become a competent writer.

Third—and this is perhaps the best news—report writing is predictable, even though code inspections work is not. Most code inspectors write only a few types of reports. Learn the basic requirements for report writing, and you're assured of producing an effective report every time you sit down to write.

The bottom line is that professional writing skills are within reach of *any inspector*—including you—provided, of course, that you're willing to invest the time and energy needed to be an effective writer.

Exercise 1 Why Are Reports Important?

Instructions: Imagine that a friend has been talking with you about a possible career in code enforcement. He or she is looking forward to working in the field. Your friend disliked English in high school and hopes to spend as little time as possible writing reports on the job.

Write a short letter explaining why report writing is important and offering suggestions for sharpening the skills needed. When

you're finished, check your ideas against the list on page 202 in the Answer Key.