

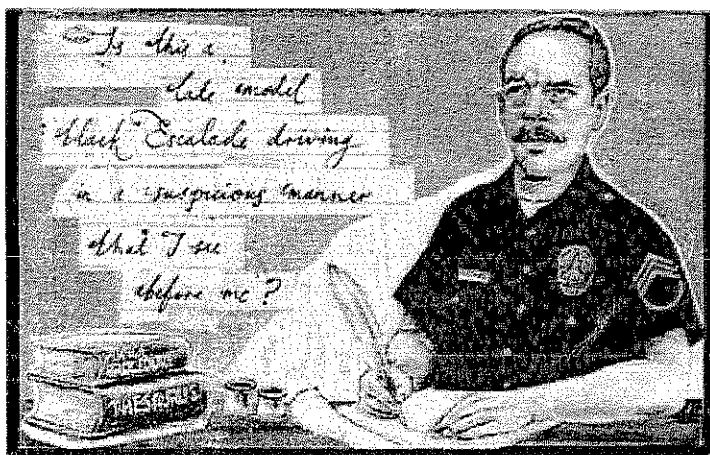
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The Art of the Police Report

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by Ellen Collett, from *The Writer's Chronicle*



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Monday through Friday, I'm enthralled by a man I've never met. His name is Martinez and he's a cop with the Los Angeles Police Department.

Martinez works in crime suppression in South Central L.A. He and his partner, Brown, patrol the streets and respond to scenes-of-crimes. Every incident they investigate generates a written account.

I know Martinez only through his incident reports, as a five-digit number on a sheet of paper. In our precinct's Crime Analysis Division, I read and code hundreds of these reports each day. They are written by every serving officer on roster, and by design most of them sound exactly alike.

Surprisingly, writing is the one constant in a cop's daily life. Whether he's assigned to vice or patrol, working bunco or undercover, every day he'll write. Most precincts have specially designated writing rooms, where the average cop hates spending time—worse than on shoot-outs, stakeouts, and court appearances put together. As with everything in the department, strict rules govern report writing, and as with any dangerous undertaking, the department will train you to do it properly. The most despised class at the police academy is the one that teaches writing. A cadet can't be sworn as a police officer without passing it.

The incident report he'll learn to write is the factual narrative account of a crime—of a rape, robbery, murder, criminal threat, lewd act, vandalism, burglary, sexual molestation, kidnapping, or assault. Every event a cop responds to generates a report.

Crime reports are written in neutral diction, and in the dispassionate uni-voice that's testament to the academy's ability to standardize writing. They feel generated rather than authored, the work of a single law enforcement consciousness rather than a specific human being.

So how can I identify Martinez from a single sentence? Why do his reports make me feel pity, terror, or despair? Make me want to put a bullet in someone's brain—preferably a wife beater's or a pedophile's, but occasionally my own? How does he use words on paper to hammer at my heart? Like all great cops, Sergeant Martinez is a sneaky fucker. He's also a master of inflection and narrative voice.

An incident report tells only what happened: where, when, and to whom. It offers multiple perspectives of the same event from often contradictory points of view of cop, victim, suspect, and witnesses. Even when these accounts agree, no two people see things identically or invest their attention in the same details. Each person's agenda is inherently personal.

An incident report lists the inventory of all physical evidence collected and booked. Anything from shell casings and rape-kit underwear to a three-legged dog in a custody dispute.

In structure, an incident report is a strict chronological narrative. It begins with a Source of Activity section, which tees up the story. It's where the narrator introduces himself and offers his credentials for telling this tale: "On 4-6-10 at approx. 1922 hours, my partner Ofcr. Brown (badge #13312) and I (Ofcr. Martinez badge #14231) were in full uniform traveling westbound on Gage Avenue when we received the radio call of an LUAC in progress at 82nd St./Central Ave."

In the investigation section that follows, the narrator tells briefly what his investigation revealed. He lists the actions taken by himself and his partner, and the facts of the case as discovered. The strict emphasis is on verifiable information.

If versions of the event differ from his, these are recorded as witness statements. These can be summaries, but quotes are often included. The narrative voice at the center of an incident report is always emotionally neutral. He's the ultimate reliable narrator. His sole job is to convince us that everything he tells us is the absolute truth. It all begins with diction.

Cadets are taught to write with care and deliberation, to choose each word for maximum accuracy. Precision, not firepower, is the goal; you don't use a semiautomatic at close range when you're packing a Smith & Wesson. Good cop diction means checking each word in a sentence to verify that it can mean only one thing. The officer must avoid words that carry associations, subtext, or bias.

Officers are encouraged to use action verbs in preference to *is* and *has*. *Is* and *has* speak abstractions—existence and possession, respectively—and where they go, descriptors follow. Action verbs, on the other hand, move us through time and space. "The Subject removed a hammer from the kitchen

drawer and struck the Victim three times in the head and neck” is a good sentence. It tells what physically happened without embellishment.

Avoid modifiers, says the academy. Adverbs—words ending in *ly*—are slippery and subjective; they shade reality and opine. Any adverb can be eliminated by choosing a better verb. “The Suspect snatched the Victim’s chain and fled” is a sentence without speculation. To know the manner in which the snatching or fleeing transpired would be interpretive.

The academy dislikes adjectives unless they pertain to direction, color, or amount. These are “empirical adjectives.” Because they speak to precision of detail, they resist interpretation. “The black Escalade fired 12 shots into the dwelling on 865 Inglewood Avenue” can mean only one thing.

Parenthetically, the two exceptions to the “no adjectives” rule are the words *bloody* and *suspicious*, invoked to justify officer initiative in field investigations. If a suspect “fled while holding his waistband in a *suspicious* manner,” it’s presumptive of a concealed weapon. If an officer investigates a neighbor complaint and the victim “opened the door wearing *bloody* clothing,” there’s a pretext to enter and reconnoiter the premises.

These guidelines about diction and story efficiency serve a deeper purpose, which is the legitimizing of the narrative “voice.” The police narrator uses neutral language and uninflected storytelling to assure us of his credibility and to win the reader’s trust. He never judges.

The perpetrator in a crime report is always the “Suspect,” even when 15 witnesses, half of them preachers, see him exit his car and shoot his cousin at point-blank range in a church parking lot. Until a jury reviews the evidence and pronounces, under the law, no crime took place. The police narrator is careful not to imply that he thinks otherwise.

The police narrator further proves his lack of bias by presenting everyone’s version of the same event, giving equal space to the “truth” as reported by victim, suspect, and witness. While he might state that DeWayne “aka Baby Insane” Johnson of the Rolling ’60s Crips shot and killed J’Marcus “aka L’il Monster” Faye of Florencia Trece, he’ll include Baby’s explanation that he was merely examining the gun with an eye toward purchase when that muthafucker up and went off. The narrator’s job isn’t to judge but to relay facts to the best of his ability, and let the reader decide the truth of it.

Words committed to paper have an agenda. The purpose of a police report is to be cited in court as proof of who did what to whom. Its ultimate agenda is justice. It seeks to protect the weak and punish the guilty. Because the stakes are high—freedom, death, or life without parole—it’s written with special care. Above all else, it aims to be truthful. At the same time, to do its job, it needs to be convincing. The story it tells should persuade 12 people in a jury box of something.

On the face of it, these two goals—truthful and persuasive—seem uncomfortably at odds. Shouldn’t facts alone persuade? Should truth need composing? And assuming that it’s possible to write toward this goal—to be truthful and persuasive at once—shouldn’t all fiction writers want to learn how?

Which brings us back to that sneaky fucker, Martinez. Martinez writes incident reports that

technically follow the academy's guidelines. He avoids modifiers and descriptors. He traces the physical action of an event without opining or speculating. He offers accounts that contradict his own findings. He's succinct and factual. He tells the literal and empirical truth. He writes in the dispassionate narrative uni-voice that conveys objectivity and distance. So why is Martinez instantly discernable on the page from a hundred other cops?

Despite the neutrality of his diction, Martinez's choices are idiosyncratic. Everything he sees reveals him. And syntactically, though he bends every rule to the breaking point, you can't bust him.

At a Lewd Acts on Child crime scene, Martinez's partner, Brown, writes, "The Victim sustained multiple injuries." Martinez would tell us, "The baby was bleeding from three orifices." There's a world of difference here. Brown gives us a victim; Martinez gives us a baby. Brown offers a fact; Martinez paints a picture.

Brown's statement moves us forward; Martinez makes us stop dead and envision the horrific crime that caused such injuries. Both statements are neutral on the surface, but the specificity of Martinez's language makes the reader see and feel.

At the same crime scene, Brown says, "We placed the Suspect in a felony prone position and took him into custody without incident." Martinez would write, "We cuffed the father." Martinez's version reminds us of the unnatural aspect of the crime, that a father (presumably) committed it. He edges near the academy no-fly zone with *father* in place of *suspect*, but gets away with it because the sentence describes police action—the cuffing—rather than any actions of the suspect. Also, nobody disputes the fact that the suspect *is* the father; it's the type of father he is that's at issue.

At the same crime scene, Martinez might note that there's "no food in the apartment." This is an empirical fact, so technically admissible. It doesn't speak to the specific crime of Lewd Acts on Child, but it does subtly add to the moral charges against the parents. Martinez inflects the barren apartment and makes it speak. Details bring scenes to life. Sometimes the image can tell everything.

In the witness section of the report, Brown might say, "Victim's mother gave no statement." Martinez would tell us, "Mother refused to cooperate." This carries a totally different emphasis and meaning. Martinez doesn't speculate if she's protecting her husband at the expense of her child. He doesn't need to. What kind of mother refuses to speak when her baby is bleeding from three orifices?

Examine these two versions of the same incident, side by side. They admit the same facts. They're both truthful. But one—Martinez's—is also persuasive. Why? It's subtly inflected in every line to signal its agenda. Though it labors under the constraints of the report format, it uses emphasis and diction to suggest how we interpret what it tells us. It may look impartial, but it's aimed like a weapon.

From a strict moral perspective or the police academy vantage point, Martinez's incident reports are flawed. They're failures of objective reportage. Though everything in them is literally true, they're technically "suspicious"; if Martinez saw a baby-raper, he's making damn sure we do too.

From a reader's perspective, Martinez's incident reports are deeply satisfying. They engage us emotionally; they vest us in the events he describes, and in the teller. They're narratives that hint at

larger truths—about Martinez himself and the South Central universe he polices. They reverberate beyond the time it takes to read them. They offer a way to understand the world.

My Sergeant Martinez may be writing reports, but he's also using the alchemy of inflection to turn them into stories—narratives that believe themselves and make us believe them, too.

Martinez succeeds—or fails, if you're his supervisors—because of his commitment to what his stories mean. He continues to protect and serve because inflection isn't illegal, and you won't catch him. It's not a story, it's “just the facts, ma'am.”

Like Martinez, a good story always has an agenda.

Like Martinez, a good story is a sneaky fucker.

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