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# CHAPTER I

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## The Need for Effective Communication

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### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should understand the following concepts:

- Why the ability to communicate effectively is critical to law enforcement officers
- The importance of communicating with members of and groups within the community

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## INTRODUCTION

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*Man does not live by words alone, despite  
the fact that sometimes he has to eat them.*

—ADLAI STEVENSON

People take communication for granted. Reading this text is one form of communication. Taking a written examination on the text material is a second form. Asking a friend to go for a cup of coffee after class is a third. In all these examples, the goal is to transfer an idea from one location to another. One authority noted that 70 percent of our time is spent communicating.<sup>1</sup> Even with the prominence of communication in everyday functions, however, little, if any, study of communication techniques is required in high schools, colleges, and police academies. In this chapter, we provide an overview of the role of oral and written communication in a law enforcement agency, and we explain some of the dynamics of communicating with others.

We are all familiar with the old adage that “talk is cheap.” Often, however, talk is absolutely worthless. We have phrases that describe this phenomenon. For example, we may engage in “idle chatter” or “jabber.” Effective communications, in contrast, is like using a map. You know there is a certain route that will take you where you want to go, but you also know that dead ends and wrong turns may delay your getting to your destination. As a cardinal rule, do not assume that everything you say is clearly understood. Understand also that hearing is not the same as understanding, and without understanding there is no effective communications.

The following are barriers to effective communications:

- Language—many, at best, words are vague. For example, you ask for information regarding a case and state that you need it soon. “Soon” may mean an hour to one person and a week to another.
- Distraction—it can be external or internal. It can also be insidious. One common external distraction is noise, for example, the audible hum of an air conditioner or the ring of a cell phone. An example of internal distraction may be that your listener is hungry and cannot give you his or her undivided attention.
- False assumptions—often the receiver assumes that he or she knows everything about the subject and so does not listen with an open mind.

Communicating is essentially a mental exercise that needs to be mastered. Communicating is, at its best, a mutual service, benefitting both the sender and the receiver. Keep in mind that hearing is not necessarily understanding and talking is not necessarily communicating.

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## THE NEED TO STUDY REPORT WRITING

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The following excerpts are from police reports, many of which were sergeant approved.

Prieto threatened that Bach was going to hers and the police were going to charged also.

They put the victim on a heart monitor and received a negative heartbeat.  
 Capt. Crane showed me the locatioon of the victim's location.  
 Rp said the victim was pronounced dead by himself at 0200 hrs today.  
 The rear driver's side tire was flat but I could not find an entry or exit wound  
 through the tire.

Not only do some police officers have difficulty writing a simple sentence, but their spelling can cause laughter or professional embarrassment. Some words taken from police reports<sup>2</sup> follow:

### **Report/Interpretation**

Wipelash/Whiplash	Hart/Heart
Aroda/Aorta	Pregnate/Pregnant
Trouma/Trauma	Stapping/Stabbing
Decease/Disease	

As the preceding examples indicate, report writing—and therefore spelling—is a major part of any law enforcement officer's duties. Reports are read by fellow officers, supervisors, and other professionals in the field. If you have not yet mastered the English language and spelling, now is the time to start. As a professional, you will be using them for the rest of your career.

In this text, and specifically in this chapter, we review the importance of communication in a law enforcement environment. Simply reading and understanding this material will not make you a more effective communicator. Anyone can improve his or her ability to communicate, either orally or in writing. Doing so, however, requires constant attention and hard work. In this chapter, we set forth certain basic principles that apply to all forms of communication and explain why police officers must be able to communicate appropriately in many situations.

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## **THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION**

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Communication, oral or written, is especially critical in a law enforcement agency. The mission of any police department is to apprehend law violators. Apprehension, however, is only the first step in the criminal justice system. Once a suspect has been arrested, a series of steps and occurrences follow: booking the suspect; performing follow-up investigations; submitting arrest information to local, state, and national databases; and, finally, testifying in court about the arrest. Members of police departments must also be able to communicate internally regarding procedures and policies that affect their operation. Likewise, the ability of law enforcement officers to communicate externally to groups or individuals within the community is crucial.

### **Communication within a Law Enforcement Environment**

In this text, we emphasize report writing as the major form of communication within a police agency. All law officers, however, from rookies to law enforcement administrators, must master several types of writing skills. Arrest reports, follow-up investigation

paperwork, memorandums, standard operating procedure literature, and promotion tests are a few common types of written communication involved in the day-to-day operation of a police department.

Writing is not the only form of information transfer within a law enforcement agency, however. Oral communication is equally important in many situations. Oral expression covers the entire spectrum of the communication process. It starts when officers greet one another before roll call and continues through roll call and out onto the streets. In Chapter 2, we discuss the oral communication process in more detail.

As mentioned, all officers, from the least experienced to the chief, must be proficient in the art of communication. Such proficiency includes the ability to express oneself orally or in writing. The new officer must understand how to communicate with citizens, fellow officers, and superiors. The sergeant must be able to transmit orders to subordinates and receive commands from superiors. Even the top law enforcement administrators must have effective communication skills, whether they are preparing departmental policy statements, responding to the media, or defending the department's budget to elected officials.

Clearly, communication skills are critical within a law enforcement agency. These skills include the ability to read, write, and understand what is written, as well as to orally transmit and receive information.

The communication process occurs not only within the agency, but also outside the agency. All officers must be able to communicate effectively with members of the community they serve.

## **Communication within the Community**

Most students have no difficulty discussing classes or current events among themselves in an informal environment. Many of these same students, however, become paralyzed with fear at the thought of standing up in class to explain a theory or a position. The ability to communicate in public forums is an important aspect of law enforcement. Community support and police involvement in the community are critical aspects of any successful law enforcement program.<sup>3</sup> In other chapters, we address specific techniques that allow law enforcement officers to effectively transmit important information within the community. The purpose of this section is to introduce you to the concept of the community and its interaction with law enforcement.

At the local or municipal level, the chief of police is usually appointed by either the city manager or the mayor. The city manager serves at the pleasure of the mayor or the city council, which, consisting of local elected officials, reacts to pressure from the community. In most jurisdictions, the sheriff is elected by citizens of the county. Therefore, the sheriff will be interested in staying in touch with members of the community. In addition, the concept of community policing is sweeping the United States, and many agencies now want to form partnerships with local communities to battle crime. All these factors make understanding how to communicate effectively with the population of any municipality imperative for law enforcement officers.

This communication takes different forms and works on many levels. The most basic form involves one-on-one communication between an officer and a citizen. The citizen may be a victim, a witness, or a perpetrator. The dynamics of this type of communication naturally will vary depending on the citizen's status.

Another common form of communication within the community involves officers' speaking before local groups. These groups may include school organizations, service

clubs, constituents of local elected officials, and college classes. In these settings, the officer provides information to the various groups.

Law enforcement officers also pass on information within the community through the local media. This form of communication reaches a large audience and in some situations is instantaneous, as in the case of a live newscast.

Many other forms of communication exist in our society. Therefore, all members of law enforcement agencies must recognize the need to perfect their skills and to be prepared to communicate on a variety of levels.

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## WRITTEN COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

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This section is included to allow you to begin using these rules and techniques immediately. An understanding of the English language and basic grammar is a necessity in law enforcement. Unfortunately, administrators of colleges, universities, and police academies assume that all students can write at a basic, understandable level. Specific English grammar courses may be required in various institutions, but, like any learned ability, unless writing is practiced, the skill achieved soon lapses. This text is not a grammar or English language book. Certain basic rules, however, if learned, memorized, and used, will help police officers avoid mistakes in report writing. At the end of each chapter is a more comprehensive guide to writing. Some of the more-basic techniques are discussed next.

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## RULES FOR IMPROVEMENT

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### Rules of Capitalization

In effect, a capital, or uppercase, letter highlights a word and points out its prominence. Rather than attempting to memorize the complex rules involved in capitalization, you can become a more effective writer if you understand a few general principles underlying the capitalization of words:<sup>4</sup>

- The first word of any sentence or direct quotation is capitalized.  
This officer approached the suspect. The suspect stated, "I didn't do it."
- The names of specific places and regions are capitalized.  
New York      Chicago      San Francisco  
the North      Lake Superior      Hawaiian Islands  
a city      to fly north      a lake      an island
- Do not capitalize the names of seasons or compass directions.  
fall      north      southwest
- Capitalize references to family relationships when such references are used as part of a proper name.  
aunt      Aunt Mary
- Names of organizations and their members are capitalized.  
Charleston Police Department      Catholics

- Names of ethnic groups, races, and nationalities are capitalized.  
African American    Hispanic    Caucasian
- Names of days, months, and holidays are capitalized.  
Monday    June    New Year's Day
- Capitalize the title of a person when the title is used as part of a proper name. Normally titles are not capitalized when used alone.  
Dr. Whiter    Chief Brown    the chief    the doctor    victim Jones
- Capitalize the first letter of a sentence enclosed in parentheses when the parenthetical text is not part of another sentence. Do not capitalize the first letter enclosed if the parenthetical material is part of another sentence.  
The chief asked for more overtime. (He does this at every meeting.)  
Joe's rank is chief (although some persons erroneously refer to him as *colonel*).
- Capitalize the first, last, and all major words in a title.
- Capitalize a common noun or adjective forming an essential part of a proper name.  
Fourth Street    Oak Lane
- Derivatives of proper names are capitalized.  
Roman (of Rome)    Italian
- Capitalize a common noun used alone as a well-known short form of a specific proper name.  
The Capitol building in Washington, DC

## Frequently Confused Words

Many words in the English language are confusing, especially those that sound alike.<sup>5</sup> Following are fourteen common examples.

### 1. *Accept* and *except*

*Accept* means “to receive” or “to give approval.”

*Except* means “to exclude” or “to leave out an item.”

### 2. *All right* and *alright*

*All right* is correct; *alright* is incorrect.

### 3. *Affect* and *effect*

*Affect* means “to influence.”

*Effect* means “to bring about” (verb) or “a result” (noun).

We want to *affect* a major change.

What was the principal *effect* of the Law Enforcement Administration Agency (LEAA)?

### 4. *Among* and *between*

*Among* is used with three or more.

*Between* is used with two.

The loot was split *among* the twelve thieves.

The loot was split *between* the two thieves.

**5. Amount and number**

*Amount* is used for things that cannot be counted.

*Number* is used for things that can be counted.

The *amount* of work left at the crime scene was enormous.

The *number* of dead bodies keeps increasing.

**6. Credible and creditable**

*Credible* means “believable.”

*Creditable* means “reputable.”

**7. Disinterested and uninterested**

*Disinterested* means “free from selfish motives.”

*Uninterested* means “not interested” or “unconcerned.”

**8. Eminent and imminent**

*Eminent* means “well known.”

*Imminent* means “about to happen.”

**9. Farther and further**

*Farther* is used when people are speaking of distance.

*Further* is used when people are referring to extent or degree.

**10. In and into**

*In* means and is used to signify a place.

*Into* means and signifies an action.

The document is *in* the safe.

The suspect went *into* the house.

**11. Infer and imply**

*Infer* means “to conclude.”

*Imply* means “to suggest.”

I *infer* from the report that we need additional officers.

Do you mean to *imply* that the butler did it?

**12. Its and it's**

*Its* is a possessive pronoun.

*It's* is a contraction of *it is*.

The food lost *its* flavor.

*It's* a hectic holiday schedule.

**13. Lie and lay**

*Lie* means “to be at rest or inactive.”

*Lay* means “to place something.”

Please *lie* down until you feel better.

Please *lay* the weapon on the bench.

**14. Your and you're**

*Your* means “of or relating to you.”

*You're* is a contraction of *you are*.

Is this *your* report?

*You're* spending too much time in *your* patrol vehicle.

## Words That Can Be Left Out<sup>6</sup>

Many times, superfluous words can be eliminated from people's writing. Two such examples follow.

1. *There*, unless it is the subject, can usually be left out.  
*Weak:* There will be three officers attending the opening.  
*Better:* Three officers will be attending the opening.
2. *That*, *which*, and *who* can be left out unless a misunderstanding would result.  
*Weak:* The sergeant thinks that shorter sentences are more effective.  
*Better:* The sergeant thinks shorter sentences are more effective.  
*Weak:* The union agreement that we signed runs for five years.  
*Better:* The union agreement we signed runs for five years.  
*Weak:* Mary Smith, who is my neighbor, saw the crime.  
*Better:* Mary Smith, my neighbor, saw the crime.

## Intensives<sup>7</sup>

Can a person be a little dead? The answer is no. Some words should not be intensified. Adding intensive words may cause embarrassment in a courtroom. Consider the following two examples.

1. Do not overuse the word *very*.  
*Weak:* The subject was very pregnant.  
*Better:* The subject was pregnant.
2. Be careful with the word *definitely*.  
*Weak:* That statement is definitely incorrect.  
*Better:* That statement is incorrect.

## Repetition

Repeating words that mean the same thing shows a lack of direction. Words should be repeated only for emphasis. Note the following five unnecessary repetitions.

1. *Each*  
*Weak:* Each and every  
*Better:* Each
2. *Foremost*  
*Weak:* First and foremost  
*Better:* Foremost
3. *Only*  
*Weak:* One and only  
*Better:* Only
4. *Total*  
*Weak:* Total and complete  
*Better:* Total
5. *Near*  
*Weak:* Close proximity  
*Better:* Near



## Spelling<sup>8</sup>

Spelling is not a mysterious science that only selected individuals can master. It is a simple mechanical act. You must, however, want to learn to spell correctly. Correct spelling takes energy and concentration. With so many other important things going on in life, correct spelling is often given low priority.

Correct spelling is important for a peace officer for at least two reasons. First, it saves time and embarrassment. The patrol officer does not like having spelling mistakes in a simple report corrected by the duty sergeant. Second, sharp defense attorneys will be more than helpful at pointing out mistakes in a report during a jury trial. Rather than listing a series of commonly misspelled words that can be memorized, we provide the following six dos and don'ts of spelling for review.

1. For words ending in *e* preceded by a consonant, omit the *e* before adding a suffix that begins with a vowel.

Slope	ing	Sloping
Please	ing	Pleasing
Observe	ing	Observing

2. Except for the word *science*, *i* goes before *e* except after *c*.

Receive	Conceive	Perceive
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3. When adding prefixes to roots, do not omit letters.

Mis	spell	Misspell
Over	rule	Overrule
Room	mate	Roommate

4. Six words end in *-ery*; the rest end in *-ary*.

Millinery	Confectionery	Stationery (paper)
Monastery	Cemetery	Distillery

5. Note every word you have to look up in the dictionary. Understand its meaning and memorize its spelling.
6. Learn how to pronounce words so that you can spell them.

No easy rules can be adopted to avoid grammatical mistakes or misspellings. Simple concentration and hard work are the keys to success in this area of writing. The reward is less time spent redrafting simple reports and multipage documents.

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## SUMMARY

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The ability to communicate effectively is a requirement for all law enforcement officers. Police officers interact with different groups daily and must be able to communicate effectively with each. Communication plays an important role in law officers' personal and professional lives.

Communication involves both oral and written methods. Law enforcement personnel must be proficient in both forms of communication. Police officers must be able to communicate effectively within their agency and outside the agency to members of the community they serve. Both forms of communication are critical to a well-functioning law enforcement agency.

The old adage “Practice makes perfect” is especially applicable to the communication process. Law enforcement personnel should attempt to improve their communication skills daily. Learning simple rules of capitalization and other techniques that are used in written communication will make an officer a more effective member of the agency.

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. Which form of communication, oral or written, is most important in each of the following situations? Justify your answers.
  - a. To the patrol officer on a beat
  - b. To the captain in charge of the Records Division
  - c. To the chief
  - d. To the prosecutor
  - e. To the citizen who is a victim of a crime
2. Who should be responsible for correcting mistakes in a police report?
  - a. The officer who makes the mistake
  - b. The officer’s supervisor
  - c. The prosecutor who tries the case
3. If you were advising a rookie on the importance of grammar and spelling and could state only one rule, what would it be?

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## PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

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1. If you discovered a grammatical mistake in your sergeant’s report, how would you handle the situation in the following cases?
  - a. If the sergeant was your supervisor
  - b. If the sergeant was a peer
  - c. If you supervised the sergeant
2. Review a classmate’s notes from another class. Do these notes give you a clear picture of what occurred in the class? List your reasons and ask the classmate whether he or she agrees with you.
3. Circle the correctly spelled word in each of the following rows.
 

abandon	abandan	abondon	abonden
abaord	abord	aboard	aboarde
absenca	absence	absenc	absance
backward	bardward	backard	backword
bialliff	bailliff	bailiff	balift
barbiturate	barbutrate	bardutirade	barbiturete
cafeteria	cafteria	cafetiria	cafetiria
calcalute	calcaulate	calcarute	calculate
calendar	callander	calander	callender
damage	demage	damege	dameage

4. Rewrite the following sentences as needed.
  - a. The amount of dead bodies found at the scene kept increasing.  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - b. We had four dollars between the three of us.  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - c. The officer excepted the package from the mail carrier.  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - d. His conduct was designed to effect the voting patterns of hispanics.  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - e. Its a cold day in june when the snow is still on the ground.  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
5. Define and explain the following words, concepts, or terms.
  - a. communications  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - b. intensives  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - c. external communications  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - d. report writing  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
6. The following paragraph was taken from a police report. Make it a better paragraph.
 

This officer responded to the location of the parking lot of Von’s and upon arrival observed two male subjects facing each other as if they wanted to fight. This officer exited the police vehicle and upon doing so subject Wolson turned and ran eastbound through the alley. At this time this officer responded to subject Hamm who was standing at the location and this officer yelled at subject Wolson to freeze and to return to this officer.

\_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

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## ENDNOTES

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<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. David K. Beryl, <i>The Process of Communications</i> (New York: Holt, Rinehart &amp; Winston, 1960), 12.</li> <li>2. Source: Sgt. Pie, “Police Stories Unabashed . . . and Unedited,” <i>The Kopout</i> (November/December 1991): 10.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. John Gnagey and Ronald Henson, “Community Surveys Help Determine Police Strategies,” <i>Police Chief</i> (March 1995): 25.</li> <li>4. See Arthur H. Bell and Roger J. Wyse, <i>The One-Minute Business Writer</i> (Homewood, Ill.: Dow Jones–Irwin, 1987), 128; Donna</li> </ol>
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- Gorrell, *A Writer's Handbook from A to Z* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1994); and Diana Hacker, *Rules for Writers*, 4th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 34.
5. *The New York Times Everyday Reader's Dictionary of Misunderstood, Misused, and Mispronounced Words*, ed. Laurence Urdang (New York: Weathervane Books, 1992), 184.
  6. See Laura Brill, *Business Writing Quick & Easy*, 2d ed. (New York: American Management Association, 1981), 12.
  7. William Zinsser, *Writing to Learn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 81.
  8. Bell and Wyse, *The One-Minute Business Writer*, 131.