Writing Investigation Reports: Structure Is the Key

By Kelly Cozy

As most workplace investigators know, written reports can run the gamut from fairly simple to extremely complex—all depending on the scope of the investigation and the number of complainants, respondents, and witnesses involved.

Regardless of a report’s complexity, structure is the key to having it easily understood by other readers. A cogent structure also helps ensure that the information is presented in an organized way, both as a whole and within individual paragraphs and sentences in the document.

Outlining: Easy as A-B-C, 1-2-3

Investigators can take steps at every part of the writing process to ensure that their document’s elements and sentences have good structure. Most find that sketching out a general outline of a report before writing helps them get and stay organized.

Written investigation reports often follow an outline format for headings and subheads, which gives them shape and coherence. The first heading is almost always a roman numeral, and from there the headings alternate between letters and numbers for as long as necessary to describe all the information that falls under that section.

Example:

II. Holiday Party of December 15, 2019

A. Witness 5’s Statement

1. Relationship with Complainant
   a. Friendship outside of work
   b. Former working relationship

2. Relationship with Respondent

3. Incident at Company Holiday Party
   a. Witness 5 saw Complainant crying at party
   b. Witness 5 called an Uber for Complainant

1) Complainant sent Witness 5 a text from the Uber ride
   2) Uber receipt shows times of travel

If certain sections need greater detail, the outline format continues, alternating between letters and numerals, with each level having its own distinct format. If necessary, italics can be used to help distinguish headlines and subheads.

Example:

IV.

A.

1.
   a.

1) WITNESS 1’S ACCOUNT
   2) SMALL CAPS

Report authors can use the outline format feature found in most versions of Word or create their own formats. As long as the outline alternates numerals and letters for the headings and uses a distinct one for each level of heading and subheading, it’s up to the author’s personal preference.

From a practical standpoint, it’s usually best to format the headings and subheads as one of the last steps in finalizing a report—especially if it will have several different authors or a lot of substantial revisions, or will be created by combining several documents. Too many changes and styles in formatting can cause rippling problems in a document.

To Capitalize or Not to Capitalize?

In an issue related to formatting, investigators writing reports often have questions about capitalization in headings and subheads. The good news is that there is a certain flexibility in this—as long as they’re consistent.

Avoid using all capital letters (WITNESS 1’S ACCOUNT) or “small caps” (WITNESS 1’S ACCOUNT) in headings and subheads. Beyond that warning, two types of capitalization styles are commonly used.
Sentence-Style Capitalization
Sentence style is fairly straightforward. As with an ordinary sentence, such as this one, only the first letter is capitalized; any names or other proper nouns such as brand names, geographical names, and titles would also be capitalized.

Examples:
• Complainant did not come in to work
• Complainant gave notice on Monday morning
• Burke told to partner with Hare on the Knox account
• The employees were required to read *Think and Grow Rich*
• Complainant had to pay for an Adobe Acrobat Pro program

Headline-Style Capitalization
In headline-style capitalization, the first and last words and most major words are capitalized; the second parts of hyphenated terms are also capitalized—for example, Smoke-Free Workplace.

However, words that should always be lowercased are:

• articles and common conjunctions: the, a, as, an, and, but, for, or, nor
• prepositions of any length—including:
  ◦ common ones that refer to movement and placement: about, above, across, after, against, among, around, at, before, behind, below, beside, between, by, down, except, for, from, in, inside, into, near, of, off, on, out, over, through, to, toward, under, up, with
  ◦ ones that refer to time: after, before, during, until
  ◦ those that are less common in everyday speech but frequently found in investigative reports: amid, among, circa, concerning, considering, during, regarding, versus, and via. Prepositions are capitalized, however, if they are part of a Latin expression, such as *De Facto* or *In Vitro*.

Examples:
• Respondent Told the Complainants to Come to an Agreement among Themselves [The lowercased words are the articles *the* and *an*, and the prepositions *to* and *among*.]
• Witness 5 and Complainant Held a Meeting regarding the Incident [The lowercased words are the articles *a* and *the*, the conjunction *and*, and the preposition *regarding*.]
• Respondent Became *De Facto* Department Supervisor [The Latin term *de facto* is capitalized.]

Some investigators use headline-style capitalization for the first two or three levels of headings and use sentence-style capitalization after that. Others prefer to use headline-style capitalization for all levels of headings. Either option is fine, as long as the same style is used consistently throughout the report.

If an investigation has several documents, such as a report of investigation and one or more witness summaries, the capitalization method should be consistent across all documents.

Everything in Order
When sections of a report cover the same territory, it’s best to have the order of information covered under each section consistent. If three witnesses are asked about four incidents, keep the order of the incidents the same in each witness’s section.

Example:
A. Witness 1’s Account
1. Incident on January 15, 2019
2. Incident on March 27, 2019
3. Incident on September 3, 2019
4. Incident on February 1, 2020

B. Witness 2’s Account
1. Incident on January 15, 2019
2. Incident on March 27, 2019
3. Incident on September 3, 2019
4. Incident on February 1, 2020

C. Witness 3’s Account
1. Incident on January 15, 2019
2. Incident on March 27, 2019
3. Incident on September 3, 2019
4. Incident on February 1, 2020

Keeping the accounts of the incidents consistent for all witnesses helps readers follow and understand the accounts more easily. It also makes it easier for the investigator to ensure that all information is documented. If a witness does not have information about a particular incident, the investigator can keep the heading and simply note that the witness was not present at the incident and cannot comment on it.

Parallel Structure
Much as outlining and consistency of order give clarity to an investigation report on the overall level, parallel structure gives clarity to the individual sentences. This means that every element of a series must be a functional match and serve the same grammatical purpose in the sentence.

Example of poor parallel structure: The Complainant said he had been bullied, harassed, and the Respondent had used racist language toward him. [The third item in the list, *the Respondent had used racist language toward him*, is not a grammatical match for the other two items in the list, *bullied* and *harassed*.]

Improved: The Complainant said he had been bullied and harassed and that the Respondent had used racist language toward him.

A common misstep appears in constructions that use *either-or, neither-nor, both-and*, and *not only-but also*. What appears in the
first half of the construction should be parallel with what appears in the second half.

**Example of poor parallel structure:** Johnson was told to either attend mandatory training or to put in a transfer. [Note that what follows either—*attend mandatory training*—is not parallel with what follows or—*to put in a transfer.*]

**Improved:** Johnson was told to either attend mandatory training or put in a transfer. [Now the wording that follows either and or—*attend mandatory training* and *put in a transfer*—are parallel grammatically.]

Parallel structure is also important in bulleted lists. Each item in the list should follow the same structure; this will make the list not only easier to read but also easier to understand.

**Example of poor parallel structure:** The Respondent said that on the date in question:

- Was out sick.
- He checked his work email but did not receive Complainant’s resignation.
- Calling Complainant, he only got voice mail.

[None of the items in the list match grammatically; the items also do not work syntactically from the lead-in sentence of *The Respondent said that on the date in question:* ...]

**Improved:** The Respondent said that on the date in question, he:

- Was out sick.
- Checked his work email but did not receive Complainant’s resignation.
- Called Complainant, but only got voice mail.

[Now all the items in the list match grammatically and work syntactically from the lead-in sentence.]

Bulleted lists that are punctuated as a sentence also need to follow parallel structure.

**Example of poor parallel structure:** When asked about the incident at the holiday party, Witness 12 said that he:

- Got caught in traffic and arrived late;
- Began feeling unwell and went to lie down on a sofa in the hotel lobby; and
- Checked into a hotel room to stay the night and “sleep it off.”

**Improved:** When asked about the incident at the holiday party, Witness 12 said that he:

- Got caught in traffic and arrived late;
- Began feeling unwell and went to lie down on a sofa in the hotel lobby; and
- Checked into a hotel room to stay the night and “sleep it off.”

An easy way to check that a list formed of a complete sentence has good structure is to read it out loud. If you find yourself stumbling over the elements or if it just doesn’t sound right, that’s a signal to look at the list more closely.

**The Final Step: Checking Your Work**
After you’ve completed a final draft, ask an editor or an investigator with “fresh eyes” and with as little prior knowledge about the case as possible to review your report.

Essential things for your reviewer to keep in mind are that: the overall structure is clear and organized, the headings and subheads are consistent (with nothing missing—subhead B is followed by subhead C, not subhead E), and individual sentences and lists follow the rules of parallel structure.

Kelly Cozy is an editor and proofreader with more than two decades of experience. Her clients have included workplace investigative firms and attorneys; health care providers and medical information services; and independent authors of fiction and non-fiction. Kelly is a member of the Editorial Freelancers Association (EFA) and American Copy Editors Society (ACES). She can be reached at booksidesidemanner@gmail.com

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