



Cop Talk

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We are trying hard to translate police beat jargon into English but we still have some frequent lapses i.e. 'fled on foot from the scene' and the like. Here are some tips on how to make our writing of police and fire news sound less like Joe Friday reading aloud.

DESCRIPTIONS – In most cases, it's better to not use a description of someone if it's not enough to enable you to pick them out of a crowd. Just age, height, weight and race generally describe a lot more people than just the crook. But, if you DO include a description, you have to include race. It is a key identifying characteristic. (Sometimes people leave race out if it's white but include it for other races. This is very wrong and somewhat racist.)

SWAT BLOT - One must remember that in a SWAT operation, cops don't just go out to immediately subdue the gunman inside the building. Instead, they work for a peaceful resolution of the situation through negotiation. Therefore, we should avoid writing "the SWAT team was HELD AT BAY by a gunman for nine hours..." since it's almost always the cops who are holding the gunman at bay. (The phrase comes from hunting hounds that howl and bay at the base of a tree after chasing at the fox or whatever they were chasing up aforementioned tree.) We should also try to avoid the word barricaded in most such instances, since it suggests a reinforced stronghold that makes it difficult for SWAT officers to penetrate. Usually SWAT officers can kick or batter or blow down a window or door pretty easily if they chose to. 'Holed up' is a more accurate phrase.

ADDRESSES - In almost all cases, it is better to tell our readers what the cross streets are rather than writing an address or a block number. (And that is now our style.) Unless they have a Thomas Brothers map book handy when they read the paper, or have worked as a delivery person for 20 years, the cross streets will do a better job of putting a location into reader's brains than the numbers. Landmarks, like nearby schools or freeways, are also very good for letting readers know where something occurred. (Also, we don't use exact addresses for individuals, dead or otherwise, unless it is needed to tell the story.)

ALLEGEDLY- This word provides little or no protection from libel exposure in most constructions. If we say, "A man who allegedly killed a cute little puppy..." the newspaper has said he killed the pooch. It is far better to say, "A man who police said killed a cute little puppy..." It's OK as a verb, but remember, allege means to assert without proof, so it's a good word when you talk about what a lawsuit claims but is inaccurate when used to describe a claim backed up with evidence.

HOSPITALS - We no longer include the name of every hospital where anyone is sent in each and every crime and disaster story. It's usually just a matter of routine procedure that determines what hospital someone goes to. But please include the name of the hospital medical center facility in a note so your colleagues can do condition checks later.

THE AREA SEWAGE INTERNAL NASTINESS INVESTIGATION NATIONAL ENTITY (ASININE)-

For most readers, government is government and police are police and the names of specific special agency names, such as the Really Bad Guy Catching Task Force (RBGCTF), are only of interest when they are relevant to the story at hand. (This rule also goes for the Metropolitan Correctional Center, which we should call the federal jail downtown, and San Diego's U.S. District Court, which we can usually call San Diego's federal court.) On fire stories, for example, readers get little from stock phrases like '19 units from the Heartland, Homeland, Javaland and Legoland fire departments responded' but are told much more by something like '45 firefighters from several local agencies battled the blaze.'

THE STREETS OF CLICHEVILLE Our trade tends to refer to all criminals and poor people as being on or from “the streets,” or to say that more cops will be sent out “on the streets.” Crooks, the unfortunate and cops are all allowed into buildings, and many actually live in them. We should avoid use of this meaningless cliché.

RESPONDED - Please do not use this verb to mean WENT someplace, as cops often do when they talk about going to:

THE SCENE - Though often a handy phrase to refer back to a location, this is very overused, almost becoming the universal (and probably bloody, bullet-ridden and debris strewn) place where all bad things happen. It is almost always better to refer to some specific location, like the apartment or the roadway, rather than The Scene.

A SUSPECTED SUSPECT - When police have no specific culprit in mind for a crime, there is absolutely no point in calling the crook a suspect. The perpetrator may be known as an assailant, a robber, a thief, a culprit, but suspect should be reserved for ne'er-do-wells being identified.

ARRESTED FOR KILLING A GUY - Be very careful with this. “Arrested IN the murder” or “arrested ON SUSPICION OF killing...” are nice non-libelous constructions. The phrase “in connection with” need only be used when suspect Ed Vlongo was only peripherally involved in the scheme at hand. That word FOR following arrest, a construction often heard on TV newscasts, convicts suspected baddies without a trial. (also let’s try to avoid ‘Arrested WERE Ed, Bill and Ted;’ because nobody talks like that.)

ARRAIGNMENTS - These are totally routine and usually non-eventful court appearances that must, by law, be held within 72 hours of an arrest unless someone bails out. In most cases therefore, it is not very informative to quote cops saying when someone will be arraigned unless we suspect lots of readers are going to want to go see the crook in the dock. Cops are often wrong about this anyway because it’s up to court officials to arraign people and defendants often waive the legal time requirement.

CAUSE OF READER DEATH - When someone was shot nine times in the head, we don't need to write, 'An autopsy is pending.' After all, it's a good bet death was caused by gunpowder-propelled lead-and-steel gun-thrown projectile-type foreign bodies (GPLaSGTPTFBs) entering subject's noggin. Also, it is redundant and repetitive and redundant to say an autopsy will be conducted to determine cause of death. That's why autopsies are performed in the first place.

CHARGED - Let's restrict our use of this word to actual criminal charges being filed and not write stuff like "So-and-so CHARGED whatshisname is a bad person." Then we can say alleged. Also, cops do not charge people with crimes, but have to ask prosecutors to do so.

JUDGES' NAMES - We are under no obligation to put judge's names in stories when they just sit there and fight to stay awake. When they do something, we will put their names in but try not to say, 'before Judge Joe Doakes.'

A KNIFE-LIKE-STABBING-DEVICE -Though we cover police, we do not have to write like they talk. Translate. When they say, "Subject alighted from the suspect vehicle and fled on foot," we'll write, "He got out of the car and ran away." This also goes for "high rate of speed" (speeding), "rendered aid" (helped), and "a physical altercation ensued" (a fight broke out).

LONE GUNMAN - This overused phrase means gunman. Phrases like this sound dramatic until you think about what they actually mean.

PRONOUNCED DEAD PRONOUNCEMENTS - We often waste a lot of words telling readers stuff like, "Sam Jones was pronounced dead at the scene at 12:10 a.m.," when readers would rather see something more conversational, like, "ones died in his car about an hour after the shooting"

AND SOME OTHER STUFF THAT PERTAINS TO ALL COPY

ACRONYMS - Our style is to use Acronyms (A) when it makes it more convenient to the reader. But we are not writing for government

bureaucrats and we should not gratuitously throw acronyms into stories if we do not need to use the shorthand later in the story. For example, it is actually possible to write about the San Diego Association of Governments without saying SANDAG over and over. And it's usually more reader friendly to avoid acronyms altogether unless they are very commonly known, like the FBI or the CIA.

ANOTHER - Remember this word means what it says, AN OTHER, so if you have three apples and I give you five apples, you now have five MORE apples, not ANOTHER five apples. Try additional or more.

TIME ELEMENTS - Though there are a few exceptions for clarity, time elements should almost always follow the verb, as in "A judge ruled yesterday that..." though the "City Council yesterday voted" construction is not technically incorrect, it certainly is not the way anyone talks outside the news business. (Have you ever heard anyone say, "I yesterday went to the store. Bought were eggs, milk and cheese. Also bought was ice cream ... the strawberry flavor.?"?)

AT ABOUT - Something either occurred AT 3 p.m. or ABOUT 3 p.m., to write both is redundant and very redundant.

THE COUNCIL SAID THEY HATE YOUR GUT ... The city council is an it, its members are a they.

CLICHE BY DESIGN ... The word "designed" is commonly used when the word "intended" would be more appropriate. As in: BRUSSELS, Belgium (AP) ... NATO has confirmed it does not plan to base large numbers of foreign combat troops in former Warsaw Pact countries that join the Western alliance. The move is designed to calm Russian fears about NATO's expansion plans.

WILL - It is always much safer to say something IS EXPECTED TO happen or IS SCHEDULED TO happen than to predict it WILL be a sure deal.

LET'S SPLIT THE MARGIN- Margin refers to the difference between two numbers. Ratio refers to the fixed relationship, or proportion, between two things. It is incorrect to say, as we did today, that respondents favor a proposition by a 2-1 margin.

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