



Jurisprudence Section – 2006

E11 Report Wording - Information not Intimidation

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By attending this presentation, attendees will gain the ability to draft reports regarding their disciplines in a manner that it is understandable and useful to all participants in the criminal justice system.

This presentation will enable members of the forensic community in all disciplines to be able to view these reports that are generated from the reader's perspective and understand what consumers of these reports need to know.

The purpose of this presentation is to discuss the issue of how reports are written in the forensic community. After discussing the problems found in this area, the presented will discuss how reports should be written, and who the target audience for these reports should be. The presentation will end with examples of what good reports look like. Too often, when practicing law in this area, one receives a report that does not seem as if its purpose is to inform. It uses terms that are not defined or explained elsewhere in the report, it uses common terminology in unconventional ways, and it fails to explain the significance of any particular finding, whether it is a match or otherwise. Additionally, the reports sometimes seem to go to great lengths to insure that even exculpatory results appear to be inculpatory. Because all parties, based upon crime lab reports, make many judgments about cases, this area is very important.

The purpose of reports from the crime lab is to inform the relevant parties in a clear and concise manner of the results of any tests performed in an unbiased manner as possible. However, informing the parties of the findings themselves without placing them into context is meaningless. Thus, the reports should not only aim to discuss the test results, but also aim to explain the significance of these findings. That way, the detective can understand how these findings fit into an investigation and determine what further needs to be done, the prosecutor will be better able to decide which charges are appropriate to file for any particular case, and the defense attorney will be in a better position to determine how to proceed with a clearer understanding of the physical evidence that exists and how it inculcates the client.

Crime lab reports should be written in such a way that all acronyms, jargons, and terms are explained fully, and so that common words are used in the clearest way possible. Additionally conclusions should be worded in such a manner that it does not appear that the results are attempting to be inculpatory. Any actions taken or assumptions made by the crime lab in their analysis should be fully explained. Additionally, any limitations in the testing should be in the report itself. Only after these steps are taken are all parties able to utilize this information to its fullest.

Reports from the crime lab should be aimed at the educated layman. The educated layman standard assumes a certain level of basic education, as well as critical reasoning skills. This standard also assumes that when the terms are explained and defined, that the target reader will be able to understand them.

Every person in the criminal justice system has a vested interest in understanding the significance of the physical evidence in every case to the best of their ability. The crime lab should facilitate this by insuring that reports are written in a clear and concise manner with all terms defined either in the body of the work itself, or in an attached glossary. By doing this, the crime labs will go a long way towards insuring transparency and trust throughout the criminal justice process.

Report, Inform, Crime Laboratory