TRANSPORTATION SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Best Practices for Narrative Writing

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A Behavior Detection Officer's Reference for Writing Incident Reports

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Table of Contents

- Introduction
- Section 1: Mission Overview
- Section 2: Ways to Identify an Acceptable IR
- Section 3: Understanding the Fundamentals
- Section 4: Formulating SIR Statements and Detail
- Section 5: The Do's and Don'ts of Reporting
- Summary

TSA 15-00014 - 007362

Section 1: Mission Overview

- Mission Focus
- Introduction to Report Writing Best Practices
- The Significance of Quality BDA Reporting
- The Transportation Information Sharing System (TISS)
- Quality Control Initiatives

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Mission Focus

Recently the Behavior Detection and Analysis (BDA) Program established a more collaborative relationship with the Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS), in which FAMS reviews and analyzes all suspicious activity in Incident Reports (IRs) submitted by Behavior Detection Officers (BDOs). Through a collaboration with Law Enforcement (LE) counterparts, BDA has identified six focal points targeted for improvement and currently seeks to increase the value of reports and enhance the quality of their narratives.

This job aid should encourage discussions about the importance of good reporting and assist managers with establishing objectives and standards that promote mentorship and enhance team performance. Ultimately, reporting is a team-coordinated effort.

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Introduction to Report Writing Best Practices

This presentation includes several examples of acceptable reports and unacceptable excerpts. It is important to remember that many of the examples with acceptable narratives could have been formatted in another way. There are many different acceptable ways to present information in an IR.

Well-written reports may differ in style, but they share a fundamental essence: *An effective and efficient reading of the incident that is clear and easily understood by the intended audience.*

Most people have a particular type of writing style; however, style is of no consequence unless it negatively impacts the quality of reporting.

During an incident, the BDO may obtain solid, relevant information. However, if multiple grammatical errors make the report difficult to follow or the name spelling is wrong, the content and significance may be lost on the reader.

On the other hand, if the report contains inaccurate information, lacks substance or is short on necessary details, it makes no difference if the spelling and grammar are flawless.

Ultimately, good reports must be clear, concise, factual, accurate, complete and timely. Officers seeking to enhance their administrative skills should consult with their managers, review the OLC catalog for relevant courses or reach out to the Office of Training and Workforce Engagement to inquire about training opportunities.

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The Significance of Quality BDA Reporting

The IR contains information that is used in part to develop BDA's risk-based security initiatives. It can help identify program performance, risks and successes. Therefore, the TSA and BDA expectation is that BDO reporting be clear, accurate and factual so the information in the IR and the data captured in the database can be used for analytical purposes.

- ***What is articulated and how it is presented matters greatly: The report may be read at the highest levels, used in an investigation or presented in court.***

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Transportation Information Sharing System

The primary administrator of the Transportation Information Sharing System (TISS) is the Federal Air Marshal Service-Information Coordination Section.

The purpose of the database is to "provide electronic submission and storage of data to be used to develop and analyze patterns and trends in order to detect, defeat and deter hostile acts committed against the United States with an emphasis towards the transportation domain."

The BDO's ability to properly report and articulate suspicious activity is critical to "connecting the dots" in support of the TSA mission.

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Quality Control Initiatives

BDA has identified six ways in which the quality of the narrative can be enhanced:

1) Ensure BDOs understand the purpose of the IR and its relationship to the SPOT Referral Report
2) Define the customers of IR information and the requirements necessary to create meaningful reports for these customers
3) Enhance the grammar and substantive value of the narrative and make the content less program-centric
4) Provide BDOs with guidance on how to self-check the quality of information in reports
5) Require managers to set higher standards for narratives before submitting an IR and provide BDOs a job aid to identify best practices
6) Standardize reporting practices whenever possible

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Section 2: Ways to Identify an Acceptable IR

- Qualities of Acceptable Report Writing
- Quality Assurance Checklist For Reviewing Reports
- Reporting Without SPII or PII

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Qualities of Acceptable Report Writing

The BDO Incident Report (IR) may be used in support of an official investigation. Prior to entering information into the database, BDOs and BDA TSMs must self-evaluate the report by using six qualities that BDA has determined to be best practices:

- Clear: Is the report free from confusion and ambiguity, and is it easily understood?
- Concise: Does the report state all relevant information in (relatively) few words by removing all expanded or superfluous details?
- Factual: Does the report contain only facts and nothing subjective or speculative? Is it free from bias and opinion?
- Accurate: Is the report free from grammatical and spelling errors? Do the details in the narrative remain consistent with information in all other BDO-generated reports?
- Complete: Does the report include all necessary information, such as who, what, when, where, why and how?
- Timely: Did the affected airport submit the report within 24 hours of the incident?

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Quality Assurance Checklist for Reviewing Reports

BDA TSMs are required to review reports to ensure they meet BDA's higher level of standards. The IR is routinely used as a reference by other organizations. Managers must identify items for correction and/or consideration prior to submitting the report by asking these questions:

- Did the BDA Manager or BDA Coordinator review the report in order to ensure it meets BDA's high-level standard before it was entered into the database? (exhibits the six identified qualities)
- Did the BDO provide the passenger's statement in context with behaviors reported?
  - e.g. (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r) (the confirming statement that explains the behavior)
- Were the titles, organizations, etc. identified by full name before their acronyms were used throughout the report?
  - e.g. Massachusetts State Police/MSP, Coordination Center Office/CCO

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Quality Assurance Checklist for Reviewing Reports (cont.)

- Did the BDO include statements that support, validate, or clarify his or her observations when applicable and appropriate to the incident?
- Did the BDO report include all organizations that were pertinent to the incident, the names and titles of those involved, and specify their individual roles and actions as they pertained to the incident?
- Did the local BDO office review the report content if the writer was not a BDO (e.g. CCO, other non-BDO component) to ensure there was an accurate interpretation of the BDO role and the incident's detail?
- Did the BDO use plain language and avoid terms that are only understood by the BDO or TSO audience?

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Quality Assurance Checklist for Reviewing Reports (cont.)

- Did the BDO report writer review the facts for incident reporting with the other BDO(s) involved to ensure the sequence of events was accurate, agreed upon, in no way confusing, and did not require clarifying questions?
- Did the BDO verbally confirm with law enforcement that the individual was arrested if stated in the report?
  - If not, the person should be reported as "detained" when taken into LE custody.
- Did the BDO articulate a highly suspicious incident in such a way that LE investigators could understand its significance?
- Did the BDO refrain from reporting information that was not relevant to the suspicious activity (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r) or information unnecessary to support the facts?

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Reporting without SPII or PII

- Certain situations may arise in which the BDO is unable to obtain a person's SPII/PII. This most often occurs in the public area where collecting SPII/PII generally is not permitted.
  - When suspicious activity is observed that could indicate a broader risk, threat, or vulnerability to TSA's core mission, it should be reported in the TISS database even if the SPII/PII is unknown.
- Without the SPII/PII, the BDO observation may be LE's only reference for information, detail and analysis.
  - The IR must clearly articulate the observations in context with behaviors so the reader understands what made the incident significant and suspicious.
- BDOs should not underrate the significance of their observations even if they are unable to identify persons of interest, especially if the suspicious activity may be an indication of surveillance activity.

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Section 3: Understanding the Fundamentals

- IR and SPOT Referral Functions
- How to Structure Acceptable Reports
- Example IR: Suspicious Activity in the Public Area
- Example IR: Opening Statements without SPII
- Example IR: Talking Points
- Example IR: SPOT Referral
- IR: Opening Statements
- IR: Body of the Report
- IR: Closing Statements
- Key Takeaways

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IR and SPOT Referral Report Functions

Both the SPOT Referral Report and the IR are equally important in evaluating BDO information. However, there are several key differences:

- The IR narrative includes a series of observations, facts and statements that paint a picture of the incident, and it must be understood by multiple audiences.
  - The IR is created for the LE customer that conducts analysis of the information reported as suspicious activity. The objective of the IR is to provide the LE community and TSA with a report that details the activity observed by the BDO; and to identify possible surveillance activity, trends or patterns, criminal activity, and suspicious individuals.
  - The IR may be read by a broad LE audience. Therefore, plain and universal language must be used to ensure the report is understood. BDOs should limit the use of BDA program-specific language in the IR narrative.
- The SPOT Referral Report includes a name and category for each behavioral indicator, but only needs to be understood by a BDO audience.
  - The SPOT Referral Report is required for BDA program analysis. The objective of this reporting is to analyze indicators and other essential program-specific data to enhance overall program performance and to assist with quality control and quality assurance.

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How to Structure Acceptable Reports

- The following slides present two example incident reports: VIPR and SPOT Referral. Both reports meet report writing expectations based on the six aforementioned qualities. After each report, slides follow with content extracted from different sections within the report used as "Talking Points". The bold text at the top of each slide should be reviewed in context with the standard text below. After studying the example reports, review the key takeaways that highlight the noteworthy points of this section. **The example report text and characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, or actual incidents, is purely coincidental.**

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Example IR: Suspicious Activity in the Public Area

(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

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Example IR: Opening Statements without SPII

BDA reports should capture four basic requirements in the opening statements: who, what, where, and when.

- Date, Time, Location
- The BDO(s) involved
- The BDOs' purpose/activity (e.g. referral, VIPR, Playbook)
- What was observed that initiated the BDO action (e.g. referral, suspicious behavior, suspicious activity)

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Example IR: Talking Points

Be clear about your activity. Do not assume that everyone who reads your report is familiar with TSA/BDA terminology or agency acronyms. Use universal and plain language.

- Talking Points: Acronyms can be used for dozens of other security and non-security related groups and titles. LE investigators or analysts may associate the acronym used in a report to something completely different unless its meaning is made clear.

"On XX/XX/XXXX, at 1420 hours, Boston Behavior Detection Officers (BDOs) were conducting a Visible Intermodal Prevention and Response (VIPR) operation with the Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS) and the Massachusetts State Police (MSP) at Boston's Logan International Airport. BDOs Jones and James observed..."

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Example IR: Talking Points (cont.)

Statements should not reflect your opinion or bias. Only report what you observe, not what you "believe" or "think" to be true.

- Talking Points: Written incorrectly and based on opinion, the information may have read: (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r) " The writer avoids using broad terms for observation such as: (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r) ". Instead, the report describes in detail exactly how the (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r) .

(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

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Example IR: Talking Points (cont.)

Describe your actions and those involved, especially when multiple organizations are working in concert (i.e. VIPR/Playbook). Clearly differentiate between the various agencies and stakeholders and link them to the appropriate names and titles.

- Talking Points: The report must provide the reader with enough knowledge to understand an unfamiliar term (example: VIPR) by painting a picture of the coordinated actions without superfluous detail. Notice how the term VIPR is clearly defined as a "multi-agency activity" simply by introducing everyone involved and stating how they interact in each circumstance.

(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

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Example IR: Talking Points (cont.)

Many report writers find it difficult to determine the difference between necessary and unnecessary information.

- Talking Points: The report states that the FAM and MSP were "unable to locate the two individuals". Considering LE never saw the two men, it is important to explain how they obtained a description of them. The content does not leave the reader with questions about the disposition of the two men or whether or not there was follow-up. The reader is made aware that there was a SIR created and that TSOC was notified; and it identifies additional contacts to the investigator that are not related to the report writer's organization.

(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

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Example IR: SPOT Referral

(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

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IR: Opening Statements

The opening statements should answer all of the most pertinent questions regarding who, what, where, and when in the first few sentences of the IR:

(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

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IR: Body of the Report

The body of the IR should support the opening statements.

Include the critical facts and discuss the suspicious activity that led to the LEO notification.

- Talking Points: The IR could accurately state that the passenger was (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r) (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r) However, if the behavior stands alone in the report, LE would consider the observation "vague or without context." By providing actual statements, the behavior is given a specific meaning.

(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

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IR: Closing Statements

The closing information in the IR should focus on *outcomes* such as:

- Database check results
- Subsequent LEO, airline or TSA actions (e.g. arrested, FSD denied entry, checked bag removed from plane)
- Notifications made to TSA or other organizations
- Actions that were initiated and unresolved, or outcomes that were unknown at the time of reporting (e.g. database results unknown, agencies contacted that did not respond, passenger's final disposition)
- Relevant after-incident actions (e.g. attachments included, review of CCTV footage, passenger rebooked at another airport)

(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

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Key Takeaways

- **Always spell out the acronym the first time it is used. After this, the acronym may be used freely throughout the report.** *(reference: Example IR Talking Points)*

- **Organize the content. Frame the opening statement, use the body of the report to detail the facts and provide closing statements to report the outcome.** *(reference: IR Opening Statements)*

- **Record events in the proper sequence and avoid confusing structure that will require the reader to review the report multiple times.** *(reference: Example IR Talking Points)*

- **Report the facts accurately. Do not interpret observations or statements, or make assumptions for the reader that erroneously appear as fact in your report.** *(reference: Qualities of Acceptable Report Writing)*

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Key Takeaways (cont.)

- **Include the individual's statement in the IR that supports the SPOT behavior identified in the referral report.** *(reference: Quality Assurance Checklist for Reviewing Reports)*

- **Be objective. Do not try to sway opinion or add emotion into the reporting by using punctuation, innuendo or words crafted to influence the reader.** *(reference: Example IR Talking Points)*

- **Only report extra detail if it is necessary to clarify a predictable question that, were the details excluded, would be left unanswered and force the reader to make an assumption.** *(reference: Quality Assurance Checklist for Reviewing Reports)*

- **If the IR includes attachments, mention them in the closing statements to ensure the reader and any subsequent reviewers know they exist and should be attached.** *(reference: IR Closing Statements)*

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Section 4: Formulating SIR Statements and Detail

- SIRs Involving Individuals with Limited or No ID
- SIRs Involving Non-Travelers
- Example: SIRs Involving Non-Travelers

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SIRs Involving Individuals with Limited or No ID

If, during a referral, the individual meets the threshold for LE notification, and the individual states that he or she does not own photo government identification, or has none in his or her possession, local LE may not be able to prove or disprove identity with any reasonable certainty.

(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r) The IR detail should include observations, statements and facts that may assist LE with confirming the person's identity in the event the IR is escalated to external LE agencies for further analysis.

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SIRs Involving Non-Travelers

Individuals who are provided a gate pass by the airlines and SIDA-badged employees that are referred for SPOT referral screening should be able to easily articulate their specific purpose and need to access the sterile area. Their answers should be free-flowing, simple and forthright.

(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § LE interview (if conducted) and final disposition will be critical to LE's analysis of the Suspicious Incident Report (SIR) or the IR.

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SIRs Involving Non-Travelers (cont.)

The example provided on the next slide is a partial report. The purpose of this content is to highlight the importance of the casual conversation and the statements made by the non-traveler. This report is unique because the conversation becomes the substance of the report. The statements, not the observations, are the most important indicators of suspicious activity.

Note the way in which the statements are organized and the efficiency with which they are listed. BDOs should organize information in such a way that creates an easier read for the analyst. This narrative provides a clear context for LE in a situation where suspicious activity is associated with an individual who is not traveling, has no government ID, and is attempting to access the sterile area.

TSA 15-00014 - 007393

Example: SIRs Involving Non-Travelers (cont.)

(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

TSA 15-00014 - 007394

Section 5: The Do's and Don'ts of Reporting

- IR and SPOT Referral Report Commonalities
- Common Reporting Errors
- BDO Report Writing Techniques

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IR and SPOT Referral Report Commonalities

- If the BDO cannot describe the SPOT behavior by using plain language in the IR, he/she should consider whether or not the behavior was appropriately applied. The next slide provides three examples that demonstrate how the IR and the SPOT Referral Report for a given incident should complement each other.

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IR and SPOT Referral Report Commonalities (cont.)

- *SPOT Referral Report:* (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)
- *IR passenger statement:* (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)
  (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

- *SPOT Referral Report:* (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)
- *IR Reported observation:* (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)
  (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

- *SPOT Referral Report:* (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)
- *IR Reported observations:* (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)
  (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

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Common Reporting Errors

- Incorrect spelling and grammar can result in a confusing and misleading report. The example found on the next slide illustrates how the report is compromised by poorly constructed content. When the report has multiple errors, the reader is forced to continually review the content for clarity, and to make assumptions. Consequently, the result is inefficient, untimely and inaccurate analysis.

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Common Reporting Errors (cont.)

(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

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Common Reporting Errors (cont.)

Incorrect: (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)
(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

✓ *Acceptable:* (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)
(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

Incorrect: (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)
(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

✓ *Acceptable:* (b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)
(b)(3):49 U.S.C. § 114(r)

Incorrect: A revolver was seen in Smith's bag by Doe when Doe was searching it.

✓ *Acceptable:* During screening of Smith's property, Doe discovered a revolver in Smith's carry-on bag.

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Common Reporting Errors (cont.)

- The report should not contain words that may appear biased, have double meaning, or are meant to invoke emotion. Do not ever bold, capitalize, underline or use exclamation points to emphasize something in the IR. Simply put, reports should be matter of fact.

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Common Reporting Errors (cont.)

Incorrect: Passenger Jones kept yelling and screaming at BDO Doe while he was having the casual conversation.

✓ *Acceptable:* Jones used a loud, raised voice when speaking with Doe. Jones continued to talk over Doe throughout the screening process.

Incorrect: Smith got angry and stated, "I refuse to cooperate!! and claimed it is not my bag!!"

✓ *Acceptable*: With a loud voice Smith stated, "I refuse to cooperate" and further stated "it is not my bag."

Incorrect: Smith was aggressive.

✓ *Acceptable:* Smith clenched his fists and kicked a chair.

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BDO Report Writing Techniques

- **Avoid using a person's title too frequently when it is unnecessary.** You should introduce a person by title. For instance; you would state "BDO Jane Doe" in the beginning of the report and subsequently refer to her simply as "Doe" or by pronoun, without repeating "BDO".

- **Limit yourself to one idea per sentence.** Short, straightforward sentences are easy to read and understand, saving time for everyone. The longer a sentence is, the more likely you are to make an error.

- **Try to start each sentence with a person, place, or thing.** Normal sentence structure in English begins with a noun, and the grammar is simple: Just put a period at the end. Complicated sentences, on the other hand, require complicated punctuation, and open the door to errors.

- **Quotations represent exact words, and words in quotes must be verbatim.** If someone makes an important, tell-all or threatening statement, you should quote it when you know the words to be exact. The passenger stated to BDO Doe "I am going to kill him."

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BDO Report Writing Techniques (cont.)

- **Use simple language.** "Since" is easier to understand than "inasmuch as." "Pertaining to" is a fancy (and time-wasting) way to write "about".

- **Stick to observable facts.** Conclusions, guesses, hunches, and other thought processes do not belong in a report. A statement like "the passenger was confrontational or aggressive" does not describe its meaning. It would be better to write "The passenger moved toward me within two inches of my person and threw the bag at the x-ray machine".

- **Do not answer a question that creates a new one.** An example of this very common mistake is "the passenger answered all my questions by saying he didn't remember." It begs the question, "What questions did you ask?".

- **Always strive for clarity.** "BDO Doe scanned the passenger's boarding pass" is vague. Did the statement mean that it was reviewed visually? Did Doe use technology to scan it, and if so, what technology?

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BDO Report Writing Techniques (cont.)

- **Be concise.** Reports are not written to impress others with one's writing flair. A report should be complete, but with the least amount of text needed. "The BDOs were conscious that they were at a noticeably safe distance while observing the passenger" is not relevant to the facts and contains unnecessary "flowery language" such as "noticeably" and "conscious".

- **Write efficiently.** If there are multiple people present, combine the like statements and discuss the differences. For example, "BDO Jones, STSM White and TSI Black were all present during screening and agree that passenger Doe stated 'there is cocaine in my bag'. However, White stated he heard Doe say it was a kilo of cocaine." This is much more efficient than writing the same quote three times.

- **Work on sentence structure and cut out excessive words whenever possible.** Never use 10 when five will do. For example, "Jones conducted a database check with negative results" is short and sweet. "Officer Jones conducted a database check and the results on it were negative" is not.

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BDO Report Writing Techniques (cont.)

- **Try to limit yourself to no more than three commas per sentence.** If a sentence has more than three commas, it may be too complicated to be read easily, and may contain usage or punctuation errors.

- **Grammar and spelling matter.** Incorrect grammar can change the meaning of what the writer is trying to say and affect the credibility of the report. "Doe was following the TSO around by watching her and seeing where she goes until she went back round the same way she came out." This is a poor, confusing way of saying, "Doe continued to observe the TSO until she reentered the Southwest checkpoint using her SIDA badge to access the C terminal door".

- **Proofread!** Utilize the skills in your network. Ask team members well-versed in grammar and spelling to review your report and use the opportunity to learn from their corrections.

TSA 15-00014 - 007406

Summary Statement: What You Do Matters

Although local law enforcement may choose not to interview, detain or arrest an individual that is referred to them during an incident, BDOs should not make an assumption about the reason the LEO appeared to take such limited action, even if it seems clear that there is deception associated with the incident.

BDOs should not believe their own actions are insignificant based on what they may correctly or incorrectly presume is LE inaction, or because they were not privy to the final outcome of an incident or subsequent investigations.

BDO after-action reporting is reviewed daily by Federal LE professionals who conduct analysis of every BDO referral that is reported in the TISS database. Analysts will escalate the IR to the appropriate agency if the report properly articulates suspicious activity with a possible nexus to terrorism, or if criminal activity is suspected.

This knowledge should assure you, and your peers, that what you report is viewed as valuable to our Law Enforcement community and that your due diligence is essential to the success of TSA's mission. "If you see something, say something" -- however, if you want to be heard and understood, make sure your report is "clear, concise, factual, accurate, complete and timely".

TSA 15-00014 - 007407