

Hi, so happy you are joining us for "**Common Mistakes in Writing About Police Work.**" If you are like me, you seek every opportunity to improve your writing. I have helped a number of ACFW members in writing about police work, legal procedures, and other crime-related matters. In turn, those best-selling Christian authors have assisted me in many ways in my writing journey.

A little about me: In addition to a law enforcement career spanning over 40 years, I have written professionally for over three decades, authoring several books and many articles on police procedure and American history. My work has appeared in national magazines like *POLICE*, *Law Officer*, *Mature Living*, *Wild West*, and *America's Civil War*. I have served in nearly every position in law enforcement—patrol officer, detective, trainer, section commander, and police chief. I recently retired as chief ranger of a Louisiana state park, but still serve on the criminal justice faculty of the University of Phoenix and write for a local news service. I am currently working on my own Christian suspense novel.

Credibility is vital in writing fiction. Even science fiction writers adhere to known scientific principles like gravity and weightlessness in space to bolster their credibility and instill plausibility. While many readers won't recognize inaccuracies and implausible scenes in your crime fiction, those who do will be turned off by the mistakes.

I stress to Christian fiction writers that for them, credibility is especially critical! No matter the topic—medicine, historical events, police work, etc.—we must write realistically and plausibly. When readers spot obvious errors in how a medical procedure or a legal matter is handled, ***they may wonder about the accuracy and reliability of discussions of matters of faith in your work.***

I classify the mistakes I see in crime fiction into seven categories. While a police procedural might involve a number of these, a cozy mystery may be less likely to involve complex legal issues. But even in cozys, I see mistakes like requiring all the possible suspects to remain in town while the police

investigate. Or there's a town sheriff. (Towns don't have sheriffs, counties do.)

Those seven categories are:

1. **weapons** - guns, Tasers, etc. Is it a pistol or a revolver? Does it matter? How often do cops use their weapons? What happens when they do?
2. **legal aspects** - search warrants, interrogations, etc. Does questioning require Miranda? Can possible suspects be forced to "remain in town"?
3. **equipment** - what kind of gear should my cop/detective/agent have? Is technology a big part of police work?
4. **organization** - what's the difference between patrol, investigations, special units? How is a sergeant different from a captain?
5. **jurisdiction** - should local, state, or federal officers be involved in my story?
6. **people** - what are cops like? How do I create a realistic character? Do they have lives outside work?
7. **procedures** - how do I have my cops decide how to handle a situation? What are the rules governing their behavior, their decision-making?

What area of police work do you struggle with in your writing?

Before we get into the seven categories, I hope you dive deep into this lesson by doing more than reading this material. One is by directly communicating with me. If you have any questions about the material, don't hesitate to email me at campruston@gmail.com. I'm serious about this—we can be very interactive even though we are all "at home."

Also, check out my Facebook page – facebook.com/WriteCrimeRight Many of the topics addressed here are explored in greater depth in articles and videos

on the Facebook page. So, after you read a section, go to my FB page and look up related articles. Feel free to ask questions there as well. I will be checking it and email several times a day.

I suggest you take this a chunk at a time rather than try to read through the entire lesson in one sitting.

1. Weapons

If you write much about the police or crime, firearms will find a place in your story. If you don't know a semi-auto from a revolver, get help. I recently read a novel by a well-known writer who had the bad guy's revolver ejecting shells all over the room as he fired. Semi-autos do that, not revolvers. I don't like to see vague terms like 'gun,' 'handgun,' or 'firearm' in descriptions. Not until more descriptive language is used first. Let readers visualize it—a mean little black pistol, a hefty chrome revolver, a sawed-off shotgun, or more specific, a Glock .40 caliber pistol, etc.

Writers make lots of mistakes here. Even experienced writers. Know the guns you specify in your crime fiction. I read a MAJOR best-selling crime fiction author whose detective flipped the "safety" on her Glock pistol. Glocks did not have external safeties at the time of publication. After-market safeties are available for installation now.

Glock is the most popular pistol for law enforcement today. I carried one off and on for 30 years. Glock has several models (model 17, 19, 43, etc.) in various calibers, including 9 millimeter, .40 caliber, .45 caliber, etc. Other manufacturers common in police work are Smith & Wesson, Sig Sauer, Colt, Ruger, and Beretta. By far, the handguns carried are semi-automatic pistols now. Revolvers were the standard up until the early 1980s. Most revolvers carry six cartridges. Depending on the semi-auto, the capacity is anywhere from 9 to 19. My Glock model 23, a compact .40 caliber pistol, holds 14 counting the cartridge in the chamber. My Glock 17 9mm has a capacity of 17 in the magazine plus one in the chamber.

Additional firearms are also common, such as a 12-gauge shotgun or a carbine rifle like an AR-15. Some officers also carry back-up handguns, sometimes attached to their body armor under a shirt.

LEOs in rural areas often carry more firepower than their big city counterparts. Several reasons. One, in rural areas, LEOs may be far from backup. The extra firepower of a rifle or shotgun compensates for being alone. Two, smaller agencies are not as restrictive as the big cities.

Other weapons like electronic control devices are used more than firearms. The best-known ECD is the Taser. That's a brand name and there are other manufacturers. A Taser *will not* knock someone out. I see that frequently in novels and movies. It just stings like crazy until it stops. And once it stops, the pain immediately stops.

There's plenty of posts on common mistakes on weapons on my Facebook page: [facebook.com/WriteCrimeRight](https://www.facebook.com/WriteCrimeRight)

2. Legal Aspects

Unless you are writing police procedurals, you probably don't want to make a deep dive into the legal aspects. They can be quite technical. But you do want to be accurate and realistic.

To keep this brief, I will post a summary of the journey through the criminal justice system on my Facebook page, [facebook.com/WriteCrimeRight](https://www.facebook.com/WriteCrimeRight). There you will see a chart of how a case moves through the criminal justice system. Note that it's much like a funnel—lots of cases go into the system but only a small percentage end in prison sentences.

Every state has a penal code or criminal code that contains all the crimes established by state law, their definition, and punishment. These vary from state to state. What is called capital murder in Texas is called first degree murder in Louisiana. Each offense describes the “elements of the crime.” These are the acts a person must commit to be convicted. For example, the burglary law requires (1) entry into a structure without authorization and (2) the intent to commit a theft or a felony inside. The prosecution must prove both elements. If a man breaks into a barn and goes to sleep on the hay, he has committed trespassing unless there's indication he intended to commit

some other crime inside. A shoplifter does not commit burglary because if the store is open for business, there's no illegal entry.

3. Equipment

I don't see much mention of technology in Christian suspense and mystery novels, but the police hardly do anything that doesn't involve high-tech equipment. Drones, infrared search devices, license plate readers, complex communications equipment, crime predictive software and much more are used routinely.

In the Christian suspense novel I'm writing, a crime analyst helps solve a spree of violent robberies by analyzing data from some of the department's technology.

Body armor is really nothing more than layers of synthetic cloth. Manufactured under brand names like Kevlar, Dyneema, and Twaron, these fibers are woven in a way that they 'capture' the bullet by slowing it down. There was different levels of protection depending on the number of layers. Officers should wear at least a level that will stop bullets from their own handgun. Armor capable of stopping a high-powered rifle round is so heavy and bulky it could not be worn in a patrol car. The fewer the layers, the less weight and less heat generated so most officers don't wear a thicker vest than what can stop bullets from their own pistol should it be taken away from them.

The appropriate terminology is "body armor" or "ballistic vest." Don't say "bulletproof vest" because they are not bulletproof for all firearms.

4. Organization

Most law enforcement agencies have a table of organization that is structured much like the military. A municipal police department has a police chief, and except for the tiniest departments, also an assistance chief, and supervisory ranks like captain, lieutenant, and sergeant. There's a division of labor and within each unit; there's supervisors and workers with ranks like detective (or

investigator) and police officer. The larger the agency, the more complex the rank structure.

In a sheriff's office, the sheriff is the chief executive. There may be a chief deputy and then ranks similar to a municipal department. In most instances, the sheriff's office handles law enforcement outside the municipalities although their authority includes all cities in the county. The sheriff usually runs the county jail and county courthouse security.

My wife and I watched a movie this week that had the sheriff working for the town mayor. The sheriff is elected by the people and serves the entire county. Even some small town police chiefs are elected but most are appointed by a town council.

The feds have their own complicated bureaucracies.

5. Jurisdiction

The biggest mistake I see in novels in regard to jurisdiction is having the wrong law enforcement agency investigating the crime. For example, the FBI has no authority to investigate most murders.

But for a few very rare exceptions, the FBI does not work murder cases. Local officers work 99.99% of all U.S. murder cases without any FBI involvement. It's the local city and county cops who must solve those cases, including serial killers. I have friends who are retired FBI who admit they never investigated a murder. It's the local guys who do that. The FBI can provide technical assistance, but they are never the lead investigators on a serial murder. Current fiction perpetuates this fallacy.

The rare murder cases handled by the FBI are the ones that occur on federal property, such as in a national park or Indian reservation, or in certain cases of terrorism or murder of a federal officer.

A county officer has authority anywhere in the county but a city police officer has no authority outside the city. A Dallas officer who goes to Oklahoma City as part of his investigation has no power to make an arrest in Oklahoma.

6. People

Is there a “typical police career”? If you go by novels, TV, and movies, you likely see police officers portrayed as one of a handful of caricatures:

The grizzled, chain-smoking, heavy-drinking, divorced, detective full of cynicism and bitterness.

The former SEAL/Green Beret/Army Ranger/Delta Force guy who joins law enforcement to continue the fight against evil while still haunted by his military experience.

The female officer who feels compelled to prove her worth to her male counterparts who think she can't handle the job.

The paunchy, no-so-bright street cop with coffee stains on his uniform and a donut in his hand .

The suspended cop who continues the investigation anyway despite his supervisor's admonitions.

Cops, especially detectives, with partners even though they don't exist in most agencies because two investigators on the same case are a waste of resources.

These tropes are used over and over in police storytelling as if they typify all cops. My career doesn't fit any of these profiles and neither do the majority of the officers I've worked with. Divorce is rampant in policing so that mirrors society in general. Most officers today do not have prior military experience. And female officers don't have to fight the battle of defending their ability like they did 40-50 years ago.

After holding just about every job that exists in police work, I became chief of police. The ability to implement my entire philosophy was the dream of my

career. We cut the crime rate by half. People began buying up dilapidated homes in formerly crime-infested neighborhoods and moving back into the city. I am very proud of what we achieved. It was “we,” not me as it took the cooperation of 50 officers to make it happen—many with college degrees, some ex-military, more women than any other local agency, most hires with no experience before joining up with us.

Those cops were human. They picked up dry cleaning, dropped off kids at school, grocery shopped, checked on mom. They took calls from the ex during an investigation because to do otherwise led to big headaches later. They forgot anniversaries, worked holidays, struggled with bills. I’m not saying focus on these in your crime novel, but at least acknowledge your cop has a life away from the job.

On the whole, law enforcement hiring has become much more professional, especially since more states have passed laws establishing some bare minimum requirements, like drug screening and psychological testing. The San Diego Police Department has created a list of “Job Dimensions for Police Officers.” Notice qualities associated with the old stereotypes about police are either ranked very low (physical ability) or not listed at all (strength, height).

- Integrity
- Interest in People
- Interpersonal Sensitivity
- Communication Skills
- Problem Solving Ability
- Judgment Under Pressure
- Willingness to Confront Problems
- Credibility as a Witness
- Observational Skills
- Learning Ability
- Appearance
- Dependability
- Physical Ability
- Desire for Self-Improvement
- Operation of a Motor Vehicle

7. Procedures

Operating procedures refers to the rules and guidelines officers must following in doing their jobs. These procedures establish the “best practices” for handling situations. Most law enforcement agencies have a “standard operating procedure” (SOP) manual. Many departments post their manual online. It covers everything from how to investigate a traffic crash to conducting an interrogation.

Criminal procedure refers to the rules the criminal justice system must follow. These rules come from court decisions like the U.S. Supreme Court opinion that established a suspect's "Miranda rights." Other rules are created by laws passed by state legislatures. And sometimes, local prosecutors set additional rules on how they want investigations handled. For example, a district attorney might require recordings of all interrogations even though state law and court decisions do not require it.

Court decisions, state laws, and prosecutor rules vary from state to state. A state court might interpret its state constitution to provide more rights to a suspect than the U.S. Constitution. It can get pretty complicated and doesn't always make for compelling reading. The deeper you get into the technicalities of police work in your writing, the more likely you will make a mistake in describing a procedure. So, you can either stick with generalities or research your topic. You can call on experts to help.

The areas of criminal procedure you are most likely to address in your writing are (1) search and seizure, (2) interrogations, (3) arrests and (4) court actions.

The 4th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects anyone in the U.S. against unreasonable searches and seizures by the government. Search warrants signed by a judge based on "probable cause" are preferred by the courts, but the Supreme Court has recognized many circumstances where a warrant is impractical or unnecessary.

Most searches by the police are conducted without a warrant. For example, a person is searched when he is arrested without the need for a warrant. People can give consent to search their homes or cars. A nosy neighbor might invite

an officer to her second floor bedroom to view a marijuana patch in the adjacent back yard. When a car suspected in a hit and run accident is found in a parking lot, paint scrapings believed to be from the victim's car can be collected without a warrant. People, bags, and vehicles are searched at the border. These are called "exceptions to the search warrant requirement."

In the case of a high profile or important case, the police are likely to seek a search warrant when time permits even if one of these "exceptions" exists. They let a judge serve as an impartial analyst to determine if reasonable cause to search exists.

A search warrant will be issued only if a judge is convinced "probable cause" exists to believe the items sought are (1) evidence of a crime and (2) are likely in the premises to be searched. Probable cause is laid out in a sworn affidavit presented to the judge.

Some final suggestions:

- Subscribe to the Twitter (X) feed or Facebook pages of some police and county sheriff's departments. Some provide details of their crimes and their operating procedures that might give you some ideas. Just seeing their photos will educate you on how they dress, what they drive, etc.
- See if a local law enforcement agency offers a citizen's police academy. Usually offered one evening a week over the course of 2-3 months, it provides great insight into how the department works.
- See if a local agency offers the opportunity to ride along with an officer. A signed waiver of liability is required but it's an unforgettable experience, even if it's a slow night. Or even a tour of the facility. The first writer who asked me for help years ago wanted to see our evidence room for a scene in her book.

- Join the Crimescenewriter group. We answer many questions there as succinctly as we can. I am available to contract for more in-depth help. To subscribe, email: Crimescenewriter2+subscribe@groups.io

- Like and share my Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/writecrimeright>

- Seek out experts. Start with local agencies. I admit some officers will be reluctant but there's many out there willing to help.

- Ask me questions! I want to offer more than reading material. Let me help by discussing your specific questions. I won't cost you anything but a little time.